

FROM NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

CASE FILE
COMPENDIUM

Bing An Ben

8

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Chapter 205: We're Both Sick in the Head

THREE DAYS PASSED. He Yu kept Xie Qingcheng in his house, undergoing treatment.

Since his return to society, He Yu had been like a balloon inflated by furious hatred—and ready to pop at any moment. Xie Qingcheng favored Chen Man so much, so much that it nearly killed him. Xie Qingcheng had even lied to him on Chen Man's behalf—that was already enough to put him in agony, in utter disillusionment. But going through hell only to finally return to the mainland and find Xie Qingcheng and Chen Man had *gotten together*... That kind of devastation would be impossible for a normal person to bear, let alone someone like him.

He tried to keep himself in check, his emotions under wraps...but in the end he failed utterly. He'd unleashed it all—his disappointment, hatred, dissatisfaction, jealousy, and three years of yearning—on Xie Qingcheng, frantically and without reservation. But just as a fever made a man's temperature rise to a certain peak before finally beginning to drop, the brutality in He Yu's heart finally seemed to cool after the events of the conference.

He became more patient with Xie Qingcheng. When he didn't have other work to attend to, he'd stay with him, the two of them together in the bedroom. He didn't even mind if they went hours without talking.

But though Xie Qingcheng's inflammation was going down, he wasn't getting better. Of course he wasn't; he hadn't been taking his medication—but He Yu didn't know that. He asked the tight-lipped personal physician he'd hired, but the doctor had no idea, having never been exposed to the details of RN-13. All he said was that Xie Qingcheng likely wasn't in the best mental state.

“Mindset is very important. You should spend more time with him, if you can.”

And so He Yu did. He wouldn't leave the house unless he had to, and watched him like a hawk—making sure he ate, took the meds He Yu knew about, and recovered through bed rest.

Of course, most of that “bed rest” required restraints. Otherwise Xie Qingcheng would just end the treatment immediately.

“You don't have to resist so hard,” said He Yu. “I said I'd bring you home myself once you're better. If you want to leave sooner you should work with me, and focus on your recovery.”

He poured a cup of hot milk and brought it to the bedside for Xie Qingcheng to drink. Xie Qingcheng turned away, refusing, and He Yu's eyes darkened. He put down the cup and reached out; Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes, awaiting violence.

One second passed. Two...three...

All He Yu did was stroke his temple. Nothing else.

These somewhat bearable conditions persisted for a time. He Yu would talk to him often, sleep with Xie Qingcheng in his arms, and sometimes even cook for him personally. He prepared a bowl of piping-hot Yangzhou fried rice, adding handfuls of translucent shrimp and sprinkling minced green onion on top, but he was such a poor cook that he failed to mix the salt evenly into the rice. Xie Qingcheng refused to touch it after the first bite, his complexion looking worse than it did before he ate anything at all.

Then He Yu tried to make some wontons in chicken broth, only to produce a soup of empty wrappers that looked like indescribable mush. This time, Xie Qingcheng didn't even bother to open his mouth after an initial glimpse.

After failing again and again, He Yu gave up in a fit of pique and asked him to name what he'd eat so he could have his cook prepare it.

“It doesn't matter. Anything, as long as you didn't make it. Your cooking...” Xie Qingcheng glanced at him. “...is too much for me.”

These words, which sounded like they held some deeper meaning, made He Yu's expression darken with burgeoning anger. But he didn't flare up. He knew Xie Qingcheng wanted him to resent him, to give up on

keeping him here for treatment. So he just paused for a beat and sneered, “Sure. Whatever you want.”

Xie Qingcheng did in fact eat the chef’s cooking, though not very much of it. It was clear he didn’t have much of an appetite. He Yu told the cooks to think of ways to get him to eat more, and the head chef went as far as to review cookbooks on tempting the appetites of pregnant women—the dishes presented now included items like hawthorn cakes and dried sour plums. Though Xie Qingcheng still wasn’t eating much, rumors began to spread that Executive He might be paying for certain indiscretions. He must’ve gotten a one-night stand pregnant, they said. Executive He only cared for his work and thus only wanted the child, not the mother, so he was presently making sure his mistress was well taken care of—once the child was born, he’d pay her off and settle the matter.

“No wonder he’s nowhere to be found outside of existing business commitments.”

“He goes home as soon as things finish.”

“I hear he often shows up late, too...”

“Oh, then it must’ve been at least three months. They can’t really *do* that before three months.”

“I hear she’s a celebrity...”

“Then it all makes sense. No one’s ever seen hide or hair of her; she’s probably attending to her own image as well. If Executive He’s going to be paying her off, this pregnancy is like a job assignment—once it’s done, she still has to work in the entertainment industry.”

“Tsk, tsk, what a mess...”

Of course, the protagonists of these rumors didn’t know a thing about them. On their end, while He Yu *said* he hated Xie Qingcheng, he became much sweeter and more considerate now that he’d reignited their trysts—but this tenderness came from a dark and twisted place. He constantly desired control over Xie Qingcheng. He wanted to tie Xie Qingcheng to his bed and keep him trapped between his fingers.

He refurbished the bedside lights to project the sea floor through the entire room. The effect was more realistic than it ever had been, rivaling the

5D theater experiences at Disneyland. Jellyfish of all sizes drifted through the projected waters, giant black sea nettles appearing every fifteen minutes. Their massive bells covered the entire bedroom ceiling as they floated past in a procession as majestic as it was eerie.

“Do you like it?” asked He Yu.

Xie Qingcheng’s response wasn’t exactly enthusiastic, but at least he replied. “...How did you do it?”

“Mandela’s cutting-edge research far surpasses anything available in the mainstream. This effect is hardly difficult to achieve.”

“Turn it off.”

He Yu went still.

“I don’t see the seafloor, only a room covered in blood.” Frigid words fell from Xie Qingcheng’s pale lips. “The blood of my parents, your mother, Lu Yuzhu, Jiang Liping...everyone who died because of Duan Wen’s Mandela Group. I can’t forget everything I hate him for,” said Xie Qingcheng. “Unlike you.”

A deeply sinister expression finally appeared on He Yu’s face. “...Xie Qingcheng, you’re the one who pushed me to them. Now you speak to me about forgetting?”

No answer was forthcoming. Only when He Yu made to leave did Xie Qingcheng speak up. “He Yu.”

He stopped.

“Did you know?”

“Hm?”

“I’d rather you died.” Xie Qingcheng paused, the rest of the sentence sticking in his throat.

And then, once I was finished with Teacher’s work, I’d follow you.

The words were too fragile, nestled in his chest and too frail to leave his mouth. Falling silent, he looked to He Yu’s face and into his eyes... After a beat, that agonizing lack of familiarity finally pushed him to try and say them out loud.

But before he could, He Yu chuckled. A mocking laugh that held a hint of derision.

“I know,” said He Yu. “You warned me well in advance. If I dared hurt anyone to achieve my goals, you’d oppose me. I’ve thought about that freakishly righteous statement for three years and counting—how could I *possibly* forget?”

Xie Qingcheng’s mouth quivered—in the end, he tightly pursed it shut. The words gathered in his throat lost all will to make it past his lips.

He Yu smiled. “I know you’ve always been a paragon of morality. Back then, if Chen Yan and the others asked you to, it probably would have been no struggle at all for you to kill me with your own hands.”

Xie Qingcheng stared at him mutely. Those unspoken words faded like insubstantial smoke.

His features twisted in a mask of barely checked restraint, He Yu left.

In truth, Xie Qingcheng could leave at any time. He Yu hadn’t locked his door; it wasn’t house arrest.

But He Yu’s bodyguards were insufferable, dogging his every step. Xie Qingcheng had tried it once; he went downstairs while He Yu was at work and left the residence. No one stopped him, but the staff asked him where he was going and insisted on sending a car for him.

Thus, while He Yu wasn’t in fact depriving Xie Qingcheng of his freedom, he was still keeping Xie Qingcheng in hand. Xie Qingcheng wouldn’t allow two bodyguards to follow him wherever he went, but they wouldn’t leave no matter what he said. They were faultlessly polite and stuck helpfully to his side regardless of Xie Qingcheng’s attitude toward them.

There was nothing he could do about it. Having to explain things to other people would be even more humiliating, and he didn’t want his family to worry. He could just stay here and wait for He Yu to send the bodyguards away. It would only be a few days, after all.

He Yu talked to Xie Qingcheng a little bit every day after he came home, but their relationship was so fragile most of these conversations

ended in both of them feeling sour.

One day, He Yu finally couldn't take it anymore. "Can't you say something pleasant?"

"What kind of pleasantries could I say to you?"

He said nothing.

"You hate me to the core, so nothing I say sounds pleasant to you. There's only one thing that could make you happier."

"What's that?"

"Send your bodyguards away," said Xie Qingcheng. "Let me go home. I'll be out of sight, out of mind."

There was a long moment of silence from He Yu. He sat down on the edge of the bed and dug his fingers into Xie Qingcheng's hair, pressing close until their noses brushed and their eyes were locked. These were all gentle movements, but his posture was one of utter dominance—a mix of love and hatred so twisted it was terrifying. His eyes slithered from Xie Qingcheng's eyes to his mouth before trailing back up. "No," he whispered. "Anything but that."

He flicked the IV drip.

"You're still sick. I'm very, *very*...worried about you."

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

"Focus on recovery. Let me keep you company."

"And if I don't want to?"

"...I'm afraid that's not up to you."

And thus their negotiations broke down.

From that day onward, Xie Qingcheng simply stopped talking to He Yu. Every night when he came home, no matter what he said—be it chatter or castigation—Xie Qingcheng only ever read his books or closed his eyes. With the air of a madman, He Yu told his unresponsive companion all sorts of irrelevant things.

Sometimes, though, He Yu wouldn't talk either. He only watched him, his gaze dark and eerie. Xie Qingcheng was perhaps the only person in

the world who could endure such a gaze.

The worst was when he changed Xie Qingcheng's bandages.

He Yu didn't permit anyone else to apply ointment for Xie Qingcheng; he'd do it personally every time he got home. At first, Xie Qingcheng fought back, his face marked with vivid desperation. But after that icy conversation, he seemed to go completely numb. No expression whatsoever graced his features, nor did he react in any way. He let He Yu put ointment on him as if He Yu were a robot.

Intentional dismissal cut deeper than the blade of a knife.

Frustration welled up in He Yu's chest. Once, after applying the ointment, he earnestly couldn't bear it anymore. "Why won't you look at me?" he snapped at Xie Qingcheng. "Are you refusing me even your hatred now?"

Only after he repeated this three times did Xie Qingcheng's brown eyes turn to slowly focus on He Yu.

At last, he spoke. "I have no right to hate you, He Yu. After all, I was the one at fault three years ago. So there's nothing I can give you anymore. Not even hate." Xie Qingcheng's eyes fluttered shut. "Do as you like."

In that moment, as He Yu stared at those lowered lashes, he felt a surge of rage so strong it made him want to tear Xie Qingcheng to bloody pieces of flesh and bone. But when he saw the IV drip in Xie Qingcheng's hand and the pallor of his face, he managed to hold it in.

Turning off the lights, he lay down beside him. There was an intentional distance between them on the large bed, an emptiness in the middle full of icy disregard. He Yu stared at the ceiling, eyes scarlet.

He knew his behavior would only worsen things between them, but he didn't want Xie Qingcheng to go. He almost needed to have him by his side, even if Xie Qingcheng was dead, even if he was nothing but bones. Keeping him like this was suffering, but at least suffering was better than those three years of lonely numbness.

On the fifth day, He Yu came back with a plastic bag. Xie Qingcheng's fever had finally gone down, but he still looked sickly and listless.

“I brought some things for you to eat,” said He Yu. “You’ll like it.”

Xie Qingcheng turned to him mechanically. “My fever is gone. It’s time you upheld your end of the promise.”

He Yu paused. Handing him the plastic bag, he carried on without acknowledging Xie Qingcheng’s response. “Drink it while it’s hot. It won’t taste good cold.”

“Your place isn’t a hospital. I won’t stay here for a lifetime.”

Silence fell. After a few moments, He Yu opened the bag himself to reveal an old-fashioned milk tea, the kind that cost two yuan per cup.

“You won’t even try it?” he asked, expressionless.

“No.”

Days of endurance finally pushed him over the edge—the weight of Xie Qingcheng’s coldness, apathy, numbness, and self-isolation finally shattered the walls of He Yu’s heart. He rose to his feet, features twisting as he grabbed the milk tea and tried to force it down Xie Qingcheng’s throat.

But his hands were shaking. Half of it spilled across Xie Qingcheng’s face, the rest down his shirt. It dribbled to the floor, as wet and sticky as an unending mess of two people entwined. The plastic straw had cut Xie Qingcheng on the lip, and rose-red blood came seeping out. He Yu stared at him—then, looking exhausted, he tossed the cup aside.

“...Why?”

No answer came.

“Why turn into this for him? Xie Qingcheng? Why are you acting like this?!”

Blood beaded on Xie Qingcheng’s mouth. He looked up coolly. “I could ask the same question of you, He Yu.”

“Wha—?”

“I thought you’d lost all interest in me. Why are you doing this again? Isn’t it quite meaningless, He Yu?” Xie Qingcheng asked. He Yu said nothing. “My life, my moods, my anything—none of it should be any of your business anymore.”

He Yu stared silently at him. Xie Qingcheng's face and shirt were soaked. He cut a pitiful sight, but his eyes remained as calm as ever. As if nothing could disturb so much as a ripple in him anymore.

Those hollow pits only stabbed He Yu deeper.

He paced back and forth, trapped in hopeless frustration, until at last he came to a hard stop in front of Xie Qingcheng, his chest heaving violently and mechanically.

"It's what you owe me," he said through gritted teeth. "Because it's what you owe me. Three years ago, you nearly got me killed. Now, I'm just trying to find some bygone memories from your body—is that not my right? That's why I'm treating your illness and having sex with you—why shouldn't I?! I just want to remember what it used to feel like!"

A long beat passed before Xie Qingcheng spoke up. "Have you?"

Blood flooded He Yu's eyes, dyeing them scarlet.

"...None of your business." All the past few days' tenderness disappeared in an instant. He Yu spoke sharply, stiffly. "It's none of your business, Xie Qingcheng. Whatever the result, I'll keep trying."

He Yu was not as good as his word. After Xie Qingcheng's fever went down, he still didn't let him go. He didn't feel the slightest guilt about this, because his doors were wide open. Xie Qingcheng was the one who wasn't leaving. Ignoring the fact that his bodyguards were trailing him, he told himself that Xie Qingcheng *was* free to leave, but he hadn't. Since he stayed, didn't that mean there was some kind of intangible connection between them still?

Within the cruel way they treated each other, wasn't there some invisible entanglement that yet lingered?

But he had to admit, ever since Xie Qingcheng's recovery, He Yu came home every day with his heart in his throat. It only ever settled back into his chest once he opened the door and saw Xie Qingcheng still there.

On the first day, Xie Qingcheng was still there. Napping on the Windsor chair inside the bedroom.

Same on the second. Staring out at the lake and the meadow through the window.

On the third and the fourth, Xie Qingcheng still stayed.

Until the sixth, when He Yu pushed the door open to see the room empty and the bed made. Xie Qingcheng's jacket, usually hung on the chair, was gone as well. He Yu's blood ran cold. He stood there, wondering if the day had finally come.

He'd actually left... He'd gone and left...

After a long pause, He Yu swept his arm across the table, sending medication and syringes flying to the ground! Bottles shattered everywhere with an almighty crash. One hand dug into his hair, the other at his hips. He panted for breath.

Had Xie Qingcheng really left...? Had he really...?

"What are you doing?"

He Yu whipped around, shuddering.

Xie Qingcheng's coat was draped over his shoulders, his thin face pale and impassive. He stood by the dark red teak door, watching He Yu.

In that moment, He Yu felt an intangible hand open up his chest and stuff his heart back into his flesh.

Ba-dump.

It beat, hard, inside his ribs.

Ba-dump. Ba-dump...

As if his soul had returned to his body, he scrubbed at his eyes and strode toward Xie Qingcheng—

He came to a stop in front of him, hands shaking. It cost him everything he had not to grab Xie Qingcheng and crush him tight into his arms.

"...Where were you?" Even his voice was shaking.

There was an imperceptible flicker in Xie Qingcheng's eyes. "Just walking around. It was stuffy in here."

He Yu opened his mouth, then closed it, unsure of what to say. He reached out, but there was nothing for him to do with his hand, so he let it drop back down.

“You thought I’d gone home?”

“...No. I...I was just looking for something. I...I can’t find it.”

Xie Qingcheng watched him quietly. “If you sent the bodyguards away, I’d leave. I don’t like having people around me.”

He Yu didn’t reply. He rubbed a hand over his face. Xie Qingcheng had won. He could no longer put on a mask of composure while facing this man.

Xie Qingcheng’s existence, he realized, was like a terrifying dagger. Even half blind, even crippled, the dagger still held a sharpness beyond its owner’s physical strength, enough to carve him apart.

Taking a deep breath, He Yu fell silent. He thought he was going insane, so he went to the washroom and slammed the door, locking himself inside.

That night, He Yu didn’t lie in bed with his back to Xie Qingcheng.

For the first time in all the days they’d been here, he crossed that invisible line between them and wrapped his arms around Xie Qingcheng’s waist as he was falling asleep—and he forced Xie Qingcheng to face him. The night was very quiet. The rustling of leaves against the window and the occasional whinnying of horses in the field was all they could hear.

He Yu stared at Xie Qingcheng like that for a very long time. “...Xie Qingcheng.” As usual, there was no response. “You’re going gray. Did you know that?”

He hid his own unavoidable grief the same way Xie Qingcheng hid his own irrepressible heartache.

Xie Qingcheng looked up, his gaze even more apathetic than usual. “Yes, everyone ages.”

“...You’re not even forty.”

“I’m already tired of living.”

A daze consumed He Yu. He lay like that for a while, his expression darkening now and then as it flickered between sadness, frenzy, and wistful confusion. In the end, he pressed himself even closer, wrapping himself around Xie Qingcheng’s frail form and leaving no gaps between them.

He pushed his jaw into the crook of his neck, just like he used to.

But He Yu couldn't bring himself to say anything gentle anymore. The I-love-yous he'd repeated so easily in the past had become thorns in his throat and ruins in his heart. He said nothing as he carried on so inexplicably, and Xie Qingcheng was now just as numb and uncaring.

One had abandoned himself to self-destruction, while the other sought nothing but death, his living body lying on the bed like a memento mori.

Later, in the early hours of the morning, neither of them had slept. Whether from a sudden impulse, or some other temptation—whatever it was, the thought occurred to He Yu, so he acted.

In that spartan bedroom, that very night, he once again had sex with Xie Qingcheng, nearly in silence.

Emotion long since pushed to its limit finally released, as if this was the only way he could be sure that Xie Qingcheng was still by his side.

That he never left.

After that night, He Yu found himself a twisted new coping mechanism. He stopped ever mentioning the idea of escorting Xie Qingcheng home—he'd changed his mind. Every night he would come home to cling to Xie Qingcheng like a newlywed husband to his wife. He wasn't so violent anymore. He never hurt Xie Qingcheng again, in words or by action.

But his heart was empty, and he sought even more from him in his attempts to fill it.

While they were in bed, He Yu went from talkative to silent. It became a cruel kind of sacrificial rite; he invoked this rite constantly to reaffirm his own life, that Xie Qingcheng still hadn't left him. Both of them knew what was sacrificed each time, although both pretended they didn't... or perhaps it was better to say that neither of them cared.

From time to time, He Yu would clear out the messages from Xie Qingcheng's phone. To him, this was another form of control, but Xie Qingcheng was unfazed—this didn't make him feel the least bit inferior. As

far as he was concerned, He Yu was acting as a secretary he didn't have to pay.

Or maybe he just had so little will to live by now that he didn't care what He Yu did.

In this fashion, time passed.

Until one day, while He Yu was out and Xie Qingcheng sat by the window, staring out at the ripples on the man-made lake, the bedroom door swung open.

Thinking it was He Yu, he didn't turn around.

A sneering voice broke the silence. "I was wondering why you were nowhere to be found. I thought vanishing before your presentation and losing the bid was so humiliating that you must have holed up somewhere because you were too afraid to be seen in public. But no, you were with Executive He, acting the part of his woman without even fighting back. It's like you enjoy it. Truly, very impressive...cousin."

Chapter 206: You Did Leave in the End

XIE QINGCHENG FROZE at the sound of the voice, but nothing showed on his face. He turned slowly and watched the interloper, unmoving. “You’re here. I thought you’d show up sooner.”

Anthony sneered. “I just didn’t realize how shameless you could be. Otherwise, I’d have visited days ago.”

“He Yu certainly trusts you. He’s given you free rein in and out of the villa.”

“I told you, I’m his boyfriend now.”

“A boyfriend who hasn’t come home with him in weeks,” Xie Qingcheng said coolly. “If he liked you at all, I’d have had a better time of it the past few days.”

Anthony flushed as if he’d been slapped. “Watch your slut mouth, Xie Qingcheng! You think he likes you? You’re just a novelty right now—he just hasn’t seen you in a while, that’s all! You’re half blind! A cripple! An old man! No one in their right mind would want you—haven’t looked in a mirror recently? Who would choose *you* if they could have me?!”

He wasn’t wrong. He was, in fact, more attractive than Xie Qingcheng at present. Anthony had gone through none of the same torment Xie Qingcheng had; he was well-kept and in perfect health. But those weren’t the kinds of things Xie Qingcheng cared about at all.

He was a naturally good-looking man who’d spent three decades soaking in other people’s kindness. He was unflappable. No matter how dire his straits, he still had pride enough that every gesture resonated with self-composure and assurance. This was the reason some people still seemed dashing well into their eighties.

“Good,” said Xie Qingcheng blandly. “Then if you could please get him to go with you to a hotel tonight, or hurry up and have him send me home? As his boyfriend, I trust you’re able to do that much.”

Anthony went pale.

“No? That’s a shame.”

There was a long beat of silence before Anthony twisted a malevolent smile from between his teeth. “You don’t have to try and trigger me, Xie Qingcheng. I know you still like him. He might be rekindling an old flame right now, but he’s long since grown sick of you. He’ll toss you aside sooner or later. The two of us have an open relationship. I’m not like you, all boring and traditionalist.”

Xie Qingcheng watched him mildly. “I don’t care what you two are up to. I don’t like him, nor do I see you as family. Whether your relationship is open or closed has nothing to do with me.”

“I replaced you!” snapped Anthony.

“Since you’re so interested in replacing me—if you really crave it all day and night, racking your brains over it, kneeling and crawling—just take it. I don’t mind.”

“Kneeling... You think I’m kneeling?” Anthony’s face writhed. “Xie Qingcheng, what right do you have to say that I’m kneeling?! Do you think you’re so untouchable? You think you’re all that? You think I don’t know how upset you are, how hurt you are inside?! I took your place as his closest confidant, and that breaks your heart! Don’t act like it isn’t true!”

“Why would it break my heart?” asked Xie Qingcheng. “We’ve both hurt each other so much. Why would I pretend?”

“You would!” spat Anthony, throwing something at Xie Qingcheng, something that smashed apart on contact with the hard table.

Xie Qingcheng’s pupils shrank.

It was the Charmander he kept at his house, the one he’d taken across the Pacific and back again. It had kept him company for so many years, only to shatter in Anthony’s hands.

“Look what I found in your house. If you didn’t care...you wouldn’t have kept it, right? *You* don’t like this kind of thing, but he does. He gave it to you, didn’t he?! That’s why you glued it back together, kept it by your side... How pathetic, Xie Qingcheng.” Anthony stared into the other man’s paling face, his own distorting back into a malicious smile.

“You love him, Xie Qingcheng. Even if you won’t admit it to yourself, the reality’s right in front of you. And he doesn’t care about you anymore—he lets me be his, now. He once loved you and nobody else, but no more. I took that away from you,” he hissed. “You lost to me! You’re defeated!”

“Xie Lishen.” Xie Qingcheng’s eyes finally moved away from the broken Charmander. His entire demeanor had changed into one Anthony knew all too well. He took an unintentional step back. This was how Xie Qingcheng had always looked when he scolded him or Xie Xue while they were little.

But after a moment, his temper flared. Why should that still give him pause, twenty years later?

“Do you know the one thing I regret not teaching you?” asked Xie Qingcheng. “The fact that winning or losing doesn’t matter. You always took triumph and defeat too seriously, and ultimately lost things much more important than any mere victory. I find you very pitiful.”

“What did you say...? That I’m pitiful?” Xie Qingcheng had hit him where it hurt. Anthony burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha ha—Xie Qingcheng! You and your parents just love looking down on people, don’t you? Let me tell you, you have no right to look down on me anymore—I’m the one who looks down on you!” He gnashed his teeth, his face a rictus of fury. “You don’t have anything anymore! A family, a job, your health...everything you love, everything you loathe has been lost to you! How dare you act so arrogant? What right do you have?!”

As if he hadn’t yet had his fill, Anthony kept on tearing at Xie Qingcheng’s defenses. “You’ve always been so self-important, and you don’t have a clue how many people around you get hurt because of it! Why don’t you take a minute to think about how you got He Yu ‘killed’? And even he’s sick of you now—even a madman who loved you so, you pushed to the brink, pushed to my side... And now you think I’m pitiful?” He threw his head back and laughed. “Nonsense, Xie Qingcheng. You don’t even know how pathetic you are! You don’t even know... You don’t even know how miserable you are in our eyes!”

“I wouldn’t even care if I was a pig in your eyes,” Xie Qingcheng retorted. “Your beady little eyes have nothing to do with me.”

“Is that so?” Those same eyes flashed with malice. “You don’t care... Sure you don’t. You don’t care at all about me knowing about your...*spicy* past with He Yu, right?”

Xie Qingcheng looked up, his gaze flickering.

Anthony smirked mysteriously. “I know all about those...things you thought were secret.” He stared into Xie Qingcheng’s eyes, hissing those venomous words out like a snake. “I bet you had no idea...*Xie Qingcheng*. But there’s no rush, I’ll tell you in detail.

“I know the first time you met was on the meadow of his family’s house, as he caught the tulle of a bouquet for you. I know the first time you had sex was at the Skynight Club—he made you drink aphrodisiac wine, and you two ended up in bed. I know you did it in the changing room at the school theater, and you played along because he had photos of you on his phone. *I know everything*.

“I know that you investigated the case. I know how much he admired you. I know the little Charmander was a present. I know you once called it ugly, looked down on it because it was fake; I know how you allowed He Yu, desperately craving the touch of a living person after He Jiwei’s death, to have sex with you. I know all the filthy things that precious mouth of yours said, including how you wanted him. I know it all, Xie Qingcheng!”

Though he didn’t lose his composure, the color was disappearing from Xie Qingcheng’s face.

“Aren’t you curious how I know? All these secrets that should’ve only existed between the two of you.” Like a snake slithering out from its skin or a spitting toad, every word he spoke was sticky—every syllable felt drenched in slime. “It’s not hard to guess. You and he are the only ones who knew, so if you didn’t tell me...the one who aired out all your dirty laundry... Of course it was He Yu! It was a boring time for him, recovering in Australia... Aside from having sex, all we did was talk. After he lost all faith in you, he told me everything. By the way—just so you know, I have the video of the two of you in his car on his birthday!”

Anthony got exactly what he wanted: Pain and shock jolted across Xie Qingcheng’s face.

“You might not’ve gotten the chance to see it yourself,” he added. “If you can, you should ask He Yu for it. After all, you’re one of the leading actors, and the scenes are riveting.” Anthony could tell he’d finally broken through Xie Qingcheng’s armor, sharpened blades sinking deep into his heart. He burst out laughing. “Every night, we’d watch that video and have some fun. Once, twice...if we were in a good mood, even more than that.”

Xie Qingcheng looked up at him. Forcing himself to remain calm, he said, “You’re fucking sick in the head.”

“I told you, cousin.” Anthony pressed closer, hungry for every scrap of pain that showed on his face. Xie Qingcheng’s misery thrilled him to the core. “I don’t care about being exclusive. I like things more open-ended. I like pleasure and excitement most of all—and your...” He chuckled. “Little devil? That’s what you call him, right? Your little devil agrees with me. When he shared that video with me, he got to feel better than he ever did by following conventions...and slowly, he got hooked.”

Anthony’s voice seemed to ring straight out of hell.

“Xie Qingcheng, your secrets became our bedtime stories and teatime gossip a long time ago. Don’t assume he still cares about you just because he’s been glued to your side the past few days. Seriously, you’re so self-obsessed—if I didn’t do you the favor of letting you know, you might’ve fooled yourself into thinking he’s still in love with you.” He snickered. “Too bad. No one will love you unconditionally ever again. To me, and to He Yu, you’re just an overdone joke! A sickly, elderly joke! He’ll get sick of you soon enough—all I have to do is wait.”

Xie Qingcheng watched him. With one of his eyes blind and the other barely able to see, his gaze was often unfocused. But those eyes were like mirrored glass; when others appeared reflected in his pupils, it was as if he could see into their hearts.

“So you came here today just to tell me these things?” he said.

Anthony ground his teeth. This wasn’t the reaction he’d expected. “...Why are you still acting so tough? When you’re sad...you should show weakness... Do you even know how?!”

“No,” said Xie Qingcheng. “Are you going to teach me?”

“You—!” Anthony flew into a rage. Even so humiliated, Xie Qingcheng still dared to strike back at him—to act as if he was the weaker party. It was too much...

It had been thirty years of this. Xie Qingcheng’s very existence was offensive—no matter how Xie Qingcheng looked at him or how little Xie Qingcheng cared about him, Anthony saw it all as a pretense.

He’d imagined countless scenarios where Xie Qingcheng had schemed against him, ever since he was little; it was a total victim complex. He imagined Xie Qingcheng was forever watching him, out of fear that he would steal something that was his. Whenever he was injured or in any way harmed, he convinced himself that Xie Qingcheng was secretly responsible. Xie Qingcheng’s father had taken the position and the benefits that should’ve belonged to him. And Xie Qingcheng was that man’s son, so how could he be any different?

So losing his homework book was Xie Qingcheng’s fault.

If he was bitten by a centipede, that must’ve meant Xie Qingcheng put it in his house as revenge.

Even the first time he confessed to a boy and got rejected—because the other party preferred his cousin—was something he blamed Xie Qingcheng for.

He was far too self-absorbed and thought too highly of himself, so he blamed everything that displeased him on the cousin who didn’t even bother thinking about him. And then, when he was faced with Xie Qingcheng’s apathy, there was only more anger and humiliation. He thought Xie Qingcheng was faking it. How could he possibly not care? How could he possibly be unbothered by how many wins and losses there were between them?

This was a sociopathy worse than psychological Ebola. It made Anthony instantly lose control of himself; fury burned its way into his head, possessing him wholly. Grabbing Xie Qingcheng by the hair, he slammed his head hard into the corner of the table.

A loud *bang* rang out. The terrifying thud pleased Anthony greatly.

Xie Lishen cackled, dragging the frail man back up and smashing his head again and again into the corner of the table. Blood gushed, staining his

hands. As he cackled he started cursing out his gege, the rictus torn across his face barely resembling a grin by the end. His maddened voice accompanied the staccato pounding of Xie Qingcheng's head against the table's edge.

"You *should* die! Xie Qingcheng, you deserve to be buried in the mud with that pathetic pride of yours! You deserve it—you deserve—"

Before he could finish his sentence, he heard a new noise coming from the door. Someone burst in and grabbed him by the arm.

"What are you doing?!"

Anthony's hand reflexively finished the movement, sending Xie Qingcheng's head slamming into the wood. His very hearing seemed to blur; Xie Qingcheng did his best to look up, but blood was still streaming from his temples and into his eyes, dyeing his whole field of vision red.

Through the crimson, he saw someone enter...

At first he thought it was He Yu, but it wasn't. For some reason, the person who came in...was...Chen Man...

Neither Xie Qingcheng nor Anthony knew how he'd managed to get to the He residence, or how he'd found this room. In the chaos, Chen Man rushed over and knocked Anthony to the ground with a textbook tackle. His eyes were alight with rage, looking like he wanted to beat the man unconscious right then and there—but this Chen Man wasn't as reckless as his younger self had been. Rationality kept his fury in check, and he swiftly pulled out a pair of handcuffs, clicking them onto Anthony's wrists before rising to his feet and turning to Xie Qingcheng.

"Ge! Are you all right?! I'll take you to the hospital right now... I'll take you to the hospital..." Panicked, he did his best to deal with the wound on Xie Qingcheng's forehead. He dug out a blue-and-white houndstooth handkerchief and pressed it to the bloody gash. "Let me get you downstairs."

"How did you find this place..."

"Xie Xue and I both thought your messages were strange, and you left the conference under such suspicious circumstances... The more we thought about it, the stranger it felt...so we went to your house. But you

weren't there, and the books were covered in dust...so I thought... I thought you might be here... It's a long story..." Chen Man's voice shook. "Ge, did He Yu do anything to you? Did he...did he..."

Xie Qingcheng shook his head to stop Chen Man's stream of questions. The color had left his lips completely.

Chen Man didn't want to waste any more time. "I'll take you away right now..."

He turned to summon his squad—after a moment, footsteps echoed outside the room. Very carefully, Chen Man wiped at the blood on Xie Qingcheng's brow, whispering to him. "It's fine, Ge, it's fine. We'll leave right now, right now... Xiao-Zhang, come give me a hand! Xiao—"

When no response came, Chen Man turned again in frustration. The sight of the man standing at the door made him go pale.

It was He Yu.

He Yu, dressed in a designer black wool jacket, darkly swept his eyes across the room. They flickered past Anthony and paused on Chen Man's face, before fixing upon Xie Qingcheng. He stared at Xie Qingcheng's forehead, hesitating for a beat, mouth parting. But when he spoke, it was to Chen Man. "You're trespassing. Did you know that, Officer Chen?"

Chen Man's partner finally made it to the door, huffing and puffing. "C-Captain—" The sight of He Yu stopped him short. "Huh? When we asked the housekeeper, he said you weren't here! How dare he lie to the police!"

He Yu stalked into the room, ignoring him. A few melted patches of snow lay on the shoulders of his coat. Slowly, he pulled off his gloves by their tips and tossed them aside. Never did his eyes leave Xie Qingcheng, not even for a moment.

"I just got back. I'll be needing an explanation—why are there police inside my house?"

"Here's the search warrant," said Chen Man. "You can read it yourself."

He Yu didn't bother taking it. "What are you searching for?"

“There was a report of you colluding with Duan Wen to bring prohibited drugs into the mainland plastic surgery market.”

“That’s right. I think I should hang up an oil painting of myself and Duan Wen colluding together in the living room—at least three by two meters in size. Otherwise, there won’t be much in the way of evidence.” He Yu’s voice was very cold. “An anonymous report lets you charge into a private home at will?”

“It’s more than that,” snapped Chen Man. “We tracked the location of Xie Qingcheng’s phone here as well!”

For a beat, He Yu stayed silent. “It must’ve taken you a few days to get past my jamming system. To be honest, you should’ve just called me and asked if Xie Qingcheng was at my house. I’d give you an honest answer—yes, that’s right. He’s here with me.”

He stepped forward and studied the wound on Xie Qingcheng’s forehead. Only then did he look back at Chen Man. “He’s right here. What, are there laws against Professor Xie Qingcheng undergoing treatment at an old friend’s house?”

“You held him captive—”

“Don’t spew slander, Officer Chen. I did no such thing. I didn’t lock the doors or close the windows or keep him from going outside. The only thing I did was shield his phone signal, because the doctors suggested he get some peace and quiet, and all of you are the opposite of that. That’s all.”

“You mean he was here of his own free will the whole time? Don’t be ridiculous, He Yu! And now one of yours has hurt him so badly... Are you blind? Can’t you see it?!”

“I can,” said He Yu. “But I also saw you injure my personal physician. Isn’t this police brutality, Officer Chen?”

“You—!”

“My doctor might’ve gotten into an altercation with Professor Xie over some private matter. I wasn’t here, so I don’t know the details, but your handcuffs are on his wrists and his face is bruised. I have surveillance cameras—why don’t we pull the tapes and see how you injured him, and whether he fought back at all?”

An angry flush flooded across Chen Man's face. For a moment, he was too mad to even speak.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. A piercing shrill still echoed through his head, like a klaxon from his body warning that it was approaching its limits. "Don't argue with him," he told Chen Man. "You can't outtalk him. Let's go."

"But..."

Dragging himself upright, Xie Qingcheng tried to hide the worst of it as best he could. He straightened his back and walked out slowly, without looking at Xie Lishen, He Yu, or even Chen Man.

He walked on ahead, past the ruins of the Charmander figurine.

He'd treasured that thing, only for He Yu to tell Xie Lishen about the whole situation like it was a joke... He walked away without even looking at it. Blood streamed from his brow. He reached up to cover it, but there was too much to stem the flow...

When he passed He Yu, he almost saw the other man's hand flicker for a moment—as if to help steady him. But He Yu ended up doing nothing at all.

Chen Man rushed to his side, taking hold of his arm once more. "Xie-ge, I'll go with you..."

"Not interested in the tapes anymore, Officer Chen?" asked He Yu coldly. "What about your search warrant? Are you really in such a hurry to leave?"

"You better remember this," snapped Chen Man. "No bad deeds go unpunished. If you've truly committed any crimes, you'll never escape the net of law."

He Yu answered that with a twist of his lips. "What crime? The crime of having sex with your ge? Oh, by the way, he didn't actually fight back while we were doing that—is having a fuckbuddy against the law now?"

"He Yu," roared Chen Man. "What the hell are you babbling about —?!"

"Babbling? You can watch the surveillance camera and take a look for yourself. You'll see how much he loves it here. If you want to take me

into custody, I'm afraid you'll need to wait for homosexuality to be made illegal first."

Fury strained at Chen Man's whole face. He opened his mouth only to close it, again and again, before finally finding his voice. But the question that emerged had nothing to do with his work. "...Are you still fucking in love with him? He Yu?"

The room was dead silent.

Anthony, too, stared at He Yu's face—even the baffled Xiao-Zhang was watching him blankly.

Xie Qingcheng was the only one who didn't turn his head.

"I answered that already." There was no expression on He Yu's face. "Right now, we're only fuckbuddies. There's a limit to my interest in him. And after almost two weeks together, all that investment born from my hatred and nostalgia is pretty much gone anyway. You can go ahead and take him away, Officer Chen. Saves me the effort of sending him away myself."

Chen Man's eyes were scarlet. It took him a long time to reply, voice shaking. "... He Yu, you beast...!"

He Yu chuckled, uninterested in wasting breath on Chen Man. "Thank you, Officer Chen. Now, if you could please leave the keys behind?" He moved to Anthony's side and helped him up with utmost tenderness. Crooking his fingers, he stroked the bruises on the other man's face. His eyes were bottomless pools, dark and unreadable. "I have to uncuff him, after all."

There was no point in wasting any more time on He Yu with Xie Qingcheng so badly injured, so in the end, Chen Man went back and uncuffed Anthony.

"Consider this a warning," Chen Man said through clenched teeth. "Next time, you're not getting let off so easily."

Laughing with his head held low, Anthony stayed silent.

Chen Man and the others left, leaving only He Yu and Anthony in the mess of a room.

Clutching the table, Anthony slowly stood on his own, wiping the blood from his hands. Throughout this whole process, He Yu never so much as looked at him. He only stared at the Charmander figurine on the ground.

The flame on its tail had shattered, and its body was broken. It merely lay there, that foolish grin still on its face—but that grin had cracked as well. He stared at it for a long time before picking it up.

Anthony tossed his bloodstained tissues in the wastebasket. As if he, too, had had enough of the day, he took a breath and said, “I’m heading back.”

He moved to the door only for a dark voice to stop him. “Hold it.”

Anthony said nothing.

“I’ll let the matter of you trespassing into my house under pretense of work for the organization pass. However—”

He Yu stood behind him, toying with the figurine. His expression held the portent of an impending storm. “What exactly did you tell Xie Qingcheng? Could you repeat it for me, Dr. Anthony?”

Chapter 207: I'm Still Waiting

ANTHONY'S FACE went taut. "Don't you have cameras? Watch the video."

"You know there's no audio." He Yu was still fiddling with the Charmander, fingertips stroking over its shattered smile. "Go on. It'll be better if you fess up voluntarily."

"There's nothing for me to confess!" Anthony exploded at him. "He Yu, you better not forget who you are. Xie Qingcheng is part of the Dreambreakers—if you keep clinging to him, Executive Duan is going to —"

He didn't get to finish his sentence. With a thud, He Yu had him pinned to the wall, face suddenly so close to his. "Duan Wen and I are just using each other to accomplish our individual goals. Both of us know that perfectly well. Do you think name-dropping him will scare me?"

With that, He Yu slammed Anthony's head into the wall. With every *thud*, he let his own hand—buried deep in Anthony's hair—scrape painfully against the textured surface. And he didn't stop himself from bleeding freely.

The second Anthony smelled his blood, his eyes widened and his gaze filled with panic. He dug clumsily into his pocket, but it was too late.

"Speak," commanded He Yu. "What did you tell Xie Qingcheng?! Tell me exactly what you said!"

His ignorance was little more than a clumsy lie. He Yu guessed what had happened the second he saw the scene of the fight, but he had to know the details.

The power of the blood toxin was incredibly strong; it worked to some extent on normal people as well. Anthony had no time to defend himself. He Yu pulled all the truth out from his mouth.

When he'd finished, there was a dead silence in the room.

He Yu sat down in the chair, fingers brushing over the still-wet blood Xie Qingcheng had left on the corner of the desk. He felt a tightness in his chest, an unstoppable rage—there wasn't the slightest expression on his face, but the calm was scarier than an outburst.

Anthony, now that he'd obeyed the blood toxin's compulsion, began to recover.

But He Yu pinned him with a look and said, "Come here."

Control swept over him once more. He went to him, dazed.

"On your knees."

A person under the compulsion of the blood toxin could do nothing but obey commands. He Yu blandly watched Anthony crawl to him before reaching out and patting him on the head. There was a chilling curve to his mouth.

Slowly, it receded—and He Yu slammed Anthony's temple into the solid corner of the table. As Anthony struggled his way free from the compulsion, he gave him a vicious kick to the chest. With a *boom*, Anthony was sent flying into a nearby cabinet filled with valuables.

He Yu took out a snow-white tissue to dab at the blood on his fingers. "Lying in *my* name? Are you sick and tired of being alive?"

The compulsion finally ended. Coughing blood, Anthony got to his feet and shot a scarlet stare at He Yu. "How dare you use your powers on a key member of the organization?!"

He Yu narrowed his eyes. "Dare? It's my choice whether to use it or not. Haven't you all been constantly wary of my blood toxin? That's why you developed that." He Yu glanced at Anthony's hand. "Too bad you didn't put it on."

"You—!"

"Go ahead and tell Duan Wen," hissed He Yu. "Go on. I've never been his servant, but that might not be the case for you. Want me to tell him exactly how you wasted time trying to get revenge for your own petty grudges, instead of doing your actual job?"

Anthony gnashed his teeth. "You ingrate. I was the one who saved you, and in those two years—"

“Since when were we having sex day and night?” He Yu’s stare was sharp and penetrating.

There was no response. The tension in the room was too much, the pressure too high. Anthony stared at He Yu’s face, quickly calculating how to hurt him back, and how best to minimize the fallout.

He found his answer.

Swiping at the blood at the corner of his mouth, Anthony swallowed and took a deep breath. “What are *you* going to do then? Explain things to Xie Qingcheng? Be my guest!” Mockery glittered in his eyes. “Do you think he’ll care? Xie Qingcheng’s with Chen Man now—do you think he cares at all who you have sex with?”

He Yu’s expression darkened.

“You can go look at the tapes, He Yu. See how he reacted when I said we’ve been sleeping together. Look at how calm he was—he hardly even blinked! My cousin’s blood runs cold. He doesn’t care about you at all. You could be sleeping with me or flirting with a thousand other people, and he wouldn’t care in the slightest. How pathetic are you, to try and tell him the truth? Are you going to give him your heart on a silver platter just like you did three years ago and let him trample all over it?

“Xie Qingcheng’s favorite thing to do is ignore other people’s hearts. Even if you told him I was lying, that no one ever replaced him in the bed of your heart, he wouldn’t care. He was willing to give up your *life* for his morals—to him, your persistence is no more than a little kid’s idea of a joke! I fucking made you look better—made it so you wouldn’t look like such a pathetic dog in front of him—and instead of thanking me, you do *this*? Really?”

“Get the hell out.” He Yu looked up coolly, cutting off Anthony’s spiel. “I may have lost all interest in Xie Qingcheng a long time ago, but I’m still the only person who’s allowed to torment him. Duan Wen knows that I’ve asked for this specifically.” He Yu’s voice grew more frigid by the second. “He belongs on my chopping block, and *you’re* in no position to take hold of the knife. Stay away from my prey. If this ever happens again, I’ll cut one of your fingers off for every hair off his head.”

His gaze was dark as an overcast sky; he tossed the bloody napkin down in front of Anthony as his final words dripped from between pearly teeth. “Get the hell out.”

Though Anthony still seemed to have something to say, he quailed at what he saw in He Yu’s eyes. Swallowing his bloody spit, he turned to leave. Once he was gone, He Yu fished the ancient Charmander out of his pocket. He stared at the cracked grin and repaired tail... He closed his eyes, holding it in both hands and pressing it to his tightly creased brow.

“Why...” he murmured, agonized.

Why hold onto it? If he kept it, why did he protect Chen Man back then, then get together with him...? *Why...Xie Qingcheng... You still care for me...don't you? You aren't as coolly unaffected as you look...right...? Right?*

He Yu clutched that battered figurine as if clinging to the irreparable ruins of what lay between them. He sat there completely stiff, like a little Charmander guarding the last of his warmth as he waited out a ceaseless storm. Like a sick little dragon.

He’d thought he would stop waiting once the downpour managed to extinguish his flame.

But the rain lasted for three years, and—though he didn’t tell anyone, nor admit it to even himself—deep inside, he was still waiting.

Xie Qingcheng went home.

The first few days were awful. An endless stream of people came to ask him questions and check on him, and even the ones who were just visiting had questions still. The only people who actually understood him, and could take any of the weight off his mind, were Xie Xue and Chen Man.

When she heard the whole story and learned that the wound on Xie Qingcheng’s forehead was from Xie Lishen, Xie Xue instantly blew her top.

“I even invited him to my wedding behind my ge’s back,” she said, teeth gnashing, to Chen Man. “Because he’s actually our cousin... He’s never been as cruel to me as he was to my ge, so I thought he’d at least...

that he'd afford me some brotherly affection on my account. I never could've imagined that he'd, he'd..."

She stamped her feet in fury.

"Did you spend much time with him?" asked Chen Man.

Xie Xue shook her head. "I did when I was younger, a lot. He treated me better than anyone else. After our families fell out, he never came back, and he never sought out me of his own volition. But..."

"But?"

"He still sent me a note for New Year's, or other occasions. Back during the Cheng Kang incident, he even called me when he found out and asked me how I was. I thought he couldn't be all bad." She paused, and lowered her voice. "Is he...is Xie Lishen...part of the Mandela Syndicate too?"

Chen Man hesitated.

He knew he shouldn't tell Xie Xue too much about the syndicate. Knowing too much wouldn't be good for her. But she was Xie Qingcheng's little sister, and Duan Wen's crimes had been publicized long ago thanks to the Wei Rong case. There was no way Xie Xue could resist asking for more details. Right now, she was stuck in a state of half ignorance. There was so much worry in her eyes as she stared into Chen Man's, hoping for an answer.

After thinking it over, he said, "...We're not sure of anything yet, Xie Xue. Much of what we know is still speculation."

Her eyes dimmed.

"The truth will come out in the end," Chen Man told her. "For now, take good care of yourself and don't let your ge worry. And...don't ask him about these things, okay?"

"Mm. Don't worry, I won't."

They avoided mentioning "these things" in front of Xie Qingcheng; they didn't talk about Anthony and never even said He Yu's name. The names were thorns in Xie Qingcheng's heart, they thought, and this man had gone through so much suffering already. There was no need to make him suffer more.

To better distract Xie Qingcheng, a clever Xie Xue brought Yaya along with her. And the baby didn't disappoint. As soon as they were in the same room, hardly half an hour passed before Xie Qingcheng—who'd been practically silent for days—said a whole sentence. "Don't touch your feet and then stick your fingers in your mouth."

Yaya only giggled, stumbling her way to the bed and throwing herself into Xie Qingcheng's arms. She put her little hands on his shoulders and gave him a very milky smooch. "Unco... Hug."

With a sigh, Xie Qingcheng hugged her.

As Yaya made Xie Qingcheng read her fairy tales, Xie Xue and Chen Man continued their talk outside.

"Chen Man, no matter what, I'm really...grateful to you..."

"It's nothing. I'm only doing my duty."

Xie Xue hesitated. "I...I know you've always held feelings for..."

Chen Man froze.

"But you never did anything like what He Yu did. He Yu's seriously become too..." When she thought of everything He Yu had once done for their family, she couldn't finish the sentence—but her heart ached.

There was no way for Chen Man to respond—he knew he nearly had.

After the wedding, he had almost committed the same crimes, but he'd still managed to wake up in time. In all the years since, he'd been working hard to distance himself from the man he was back then. In all the years Xie Qingcheng had been gone, he'd matured faster, and trained more, than he ever had before.

At first, he'd wanted to outdo himself, to become someone Xie Qingcheng would truly see.

In the process, however, he'd gradually realized that some things couldn't be forced. He saw how madly and desperately He Yu was in love with Xie Qingcheng, and how dispassionately cold he'd now become. In his heart, he asked himself—could he pursue Xie Qingcheng to the same extent, and pay the same price? He'd thought he could, three years ago. But in a storm of bullets, through all his missions, through the deaths of his comrades, he realized he wasn't an island unto himself the way He Yu was.

He had the grace of his parents and held the hopes of his family; he had the insignia on his shoulders and the badge on his cap. He was responsible for so much, for things he couldn't sacrifice just because he loved one person.

So he knew he couldn't pursue Xie Qingcheng. Just that he still loved him. He knew that his love didn't run as deep as He Yu's, but he still loved him—it just wasn't as stubborn, or as mad.

Last year, his mother had fallen ill. In her delirium, she kept mumbling about how much she hoped Chen Man would find *something*, something that would keep him from risking his life anymore.

As he stared into his mother's gray face, he'd thought—the days when she was still a youthful beauty seemed like yesterday, but in the blink of an eye she'd formed wrinkles and grown gray hairs. He'd felt awful back then. His parents were the traditionalist type; there was no way they'd accept him being into men.

When he was younger, he'd thought about telling his parents after he and Xie Qingcheng got together. But Xie Qingcheng didn't love him. He'd learned many things now, and gained a deeper understanding of life. He couldn't keep hurting his family for his own selfish impulses.

Chen Man looked at Xie Xue, then changed the subject. "I have a mission next week. While I'm gone, you need to watch over Xie-ge—it's best to take him to the Wei's. He Yu won't be able to do anything too excessive in Wei family territory. If your brother refuses, just have..." He trailed off.

"Have Yaya convince him." Xie Xue and Chen Man had the same thought.

"...Yes. Exactly."

"Okay," said Xie Xue. "Then you have to be very careful on your mission. My ge has always seen you as part of the family—if anything happens to you..." She looked into Chen Man's face. He'd been a frontline police officer for three years now, with nearly all his cases related to crimes committed by Duan Wen and the Mandela Syndicate. A scar now marked his face. "...He'll be very upset if you get hurt."

He nodded.

Standing in the courtyard, Chen Man looked through the window at Xie Qingcheng's exhausted profile. *Ge*, he thought to himself. *If everything goes smoothly, this decades-long case...will soon...come to an end.*

You and I, everyone who's died, will finally get closure.

Ge, I hope I make it back from this classified mission. Then, I'll stay by your side—just like what you wrote on that card. As brothers, as friends. That would be enough.

Time passed very quickly. The weekend arrived in the blink of an eye.

Inside the meeting room of the Huzhou Police Department—

Most of the higher-ups of Project Dreambreaker were gathered there. Among their number were criminal and armed police, military cadres, medical professionals, researchers, and governmental staff. They were lucky that the room was big enough to fit them all.

“Over the last two years we've been fighting Duan Wen, we've gradually attained a lot of information about that base of theirs. This intelligence has come at the cost of many battles, of every drop of blood and every life lost.”

At the podium stood the police commander, giving a battle address to the comrades beneath him with conviction and confidence. His eyes were like a hawk's and his expression like a wolf's; his hand stayed steady on the metal lectern as behind him lay the flickering surface of the projector screen, flashing with information about the Mandela Syndicate.

“The naval battle at Guangshi three years ago was the first time we openly exchanged blows with them. Though we did learn the location of their island, and some other information, the troops we sent to that mysterious place faced devastating attacks the moment they made landfall. We suffered heavy casualties, and the survivors brought back news, alongside their comrades' hopes, from the frontlines.”

He paused, clicking the controller to show an infrared image of an island on screen.

“Mandela Island, hidden behind layers of cloaking, is a Treasure Island almost completely cut off from the outside world. If we hadn’t broken through their control system, we’d never be able to locate them. We were too reckless then; we took them for a regular criminal organization, and for that we paid a heavy price. The soldiers lucky enough to return alive told us that the island is far beyond ordinary society; it resembles a world of futuristic tech, complete with defense systems we’ve never even seen before. For example—”

The commander clicked the remote again.

“Robotic soldiers. Robot dogs—inspired by Cerberus from *Resident Evil*, I believe. A chemical river so toxic it kills passing birds.”

He punctuated each statement with a click, the screen flicking between short profiles of each physical or chemical weapon. Another click. “As well as...a dark labyrinth.” The blood river disappeared. What took its place was what looked like a dense forest—that, upon closer inspection, revealed itself to be a maze of pitch-black tunnels.

“A solid eighty percent of the island’s territory has been built into the natural defense mechanism of this maze, with the remaining twenty being the fortress that acts as their primary base. We’ve been trying to crack it for the past three years, but many lives have been lost to their futuristic weapons. The most important reason this island’s such a living hell, I’d say, is because the Mandela Syndicate is a scientific research group at its core. There are a number of genius madmen from all over the world living on the island; I refer to them as such because they hardly use their skills to benefit humanity. Instead, every one of them has been convicted in their home country for conducting inhumane experiments.”

The screen now showed the profiles of several wanted criminals.

“Those we know of include the military engineer Zoya. A fugitive since 2004, known for conducting radiation experiments in the Chernobyl exclusion zone on kidnapped children.

“Ivan. There are far too many Russians with the name, so it’s impossible to even begin to track down his true identity—and no one’s ever seen his face. We’ve only heard of this person from a fight with Zoya. They hail from the same hometown, are very close, and worked together to develop a more agile robot dog.

“And Hui Zhen.”

A Chinese name popping up so suddenly after two foreign ones, and such an old-fashioned one at that; it didn't seem to fit in with the rest. But none of the Dreambreakers laughed.

They studied the woman's profile solemnly.

“Just like Ivan, we've never seen her face—but in the past few decades, there have been several horrific homicides that cannot be explained by ordinary science. The victims are found as puddles of pus and blood on the ground, and the killer remains at large. The police working on the case developed a profile for the killer, portraying her as a woman—and a very intellectual, cultured woman at that. A scientist. Veteran members of the force gave her a name rather indicative of their era, so she's known as Hui Zhen.”

The commander's stern eyes swept across the room. “Her activity here in the mainland ended in the seventies. Homicide cases where the victims were found as puddles of blood ceased entirely for several decades. We thought that Hui Zhen had died without fanfare, or turned away from the trade—up until our fourth assault on Mandela Island, when one of our officers entered the labyrinth and was targeted by an automatic rifle... melting into blood and pus. We obtained footage of his death. The process took only five seconds. We've concluded it's very likely that Hui Zhen is still alive, and that she's presently living on that maritime monstrosity of an island.”

The commander paused, looking into the eyes of all those present as if checking in on their strength of will.

“But there is no battle that righteousness cannot win, and no sacrifices that are made in vain. This intelligence... These...” He clicked the wheel on the remote, and the projection broke apart like an avalanche—all the files and pieces of information spun around each other like a snowstorm across the screen. The commander's chest heaved with passion as he spoke. “In the past three years, we've received five thousand, four hundred eighty-nine pieces of intelligence, enough for us to finally develop an appropriate response to the weapons on the island. Now, we're ready to launch the final step—and it must be the final step. We must act before the

Mandela Syndicate brings their drugs, their nightmares, and their lunatic inventions into society—we must destroy them once and for all.”

Under the lights, the man’s eyes welled with tears. “It’s been three years. It’s time for it to end.”

After the conference, he wearily made his way back to his own office. It had been a very successful address. Everyone knew this would be their first true offense since the attack three years ago—this was the real fight, performed with sufficient preparation, one that would flip the tables entirely.

However...

The man’s eyes fell on his own computer.

On the screen was a rotating 3D visualization of Mandela Island, with known areas marked in red. But near the central fortress, there was only a blank white patch...

He pinched the space between his brows, vexed.

None of their soldiers or sensors had made it that far. They had no functional avenues of attack there, and they were about to face inventions far beyond what they could possibly imagine. He was truly worried that a 20 percent risk would destroy everything they worked to build. So he needed more information. Before their fleet sailed out, he *had* to get more —

Thud-thud-thud. A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts.

The commander’s head turned at once, as if he’d been expecting the intrusion. The secretary spoke as soon as the door was half-open.

“Commander, there’s someone who wants to see you. He’s—”

“Hurry up and let him in,” he interrupted.

The door swung open the rest of the way. From the darkness emerged a tall, handsome man wearing silver-rimmed glasses. He came to a stop in front of the commander’s desk.

“...Professor Xie?” asked the commander, clearly confused.

“I’ve come with information about Duan Wen’s island, commander,” said Xie Qingcheng. “I hope what I have here is what you need.” He

handed over an icy metallic advanced USB stick. “Everything’s in here.”

As it turned out, Xie Qingcheng hadn’t just been staying at He Yu’s house to recover.

In truth, He Yu hadn’t been wrong. Though he was being monitored, Xie Qingcheng had never actually been held captive. If he’d really wanted to leave, he could have at any time. The reason he didn’t wasn’t because he wanted to keep trysting with He Yu. Not only was he simply too frail to fight back...

...he’d spent the entire time trying to find blind spots in the surveillance, so he could dig up records on the Mandela Organization in He Yu’s communications!

He had never truly reduced himself to a useless, helpless patient full of futile rage.

“Where’d you get this...” The commander’s face froze, as if he’d sensed something—but he still extended his hand. Before he could touch the device, though, two slim and pale fingers pinned it down. Looking up along that hand, he met Xie Qingcheng’s eyes. “What do you mean by this?” he demanded.

Something unreadable was written in Xie Qingcheng’s face. “Before you take these files, there’s something very important I’d like to confirm with you.”

Chapter 208: Go On, All the Way Forward

THE MONDAY BEFORE Chen Man left, he arranged to meet with Xie Qingcheng one last time. As another member of Project Dreambreaker, he knew very well what he was heading off to do.

“Ge, the wound on your forehead...”

“It’s fine. It’s better now.” Xie Qingcheng and Chen Man were walking through the heroes’ graveyard side by side, a breeze fluttering through their black clothes.

After Wei Rong’s crimes were publicized, Xie Ping and Zhou Muying’s graves had been moved by the Huzhou police into the inner courtyard, close to Chen Lisheng’s headstone. Xie Qingcheng and Chen Man placed two pristine bouquets down for their dead; the scent of white chrysanthemums lingered on their fingertips.

Xie Qingcheng looked at Chen Lisheng’s grave, his ears filled with the rustle of nearby pine and cypress, and the cawing of crows. “It’s tomorrow, isn’t it.”

“Yes.”

“It’s been twenty-three years.”

“Yeah, it has...”

“Chen Man. I still remember, before he passed, my father telling me about a student of his coming to our house... He probably meant your ge. Their student-teacher relationship was very close, nothing like what he had with his other pupils.”

The gold text on the stone was dulled with age.

“My father didn’t have many pupils either; he mostly taught with his other coworkers. Your brother and his classmate were the only two he mentored before even graduating.”

“Mm, I know. Li Yun-dage. His grave is here, too...”

Xie Qingcheng hadn't meant to pay his respects; the name only came up in passing. Li Yun had gone with another mentor soon after his father passed, so they weren't exactly close.

The two of them kept the dead company for a little longer, leaves rustling all around them.

"Right," said Xie Qingcheng.

"Hm?"

"Three years ago, part of the reason you went to Guangshi was because you heard they suspected He Pharmaceuticals, correct?"

Chen Man froze, eyes widening. He hadn't expected Xie Qingcheng to change the topic so suddenly, let alone to a question like this. This was something Xie Qingcheng hadn't asked about even back then.

But now...

The clouds dipped low in the horizon. Xie Qingcheng's hands were in the pockets of his jacket; he was purposefully turned away from Chen Man, eyes still fixed on all those gravestones.

Chen Man's voice shook slightly. Though they'd talked about other things before this, he immediately knew this was the real reason Xie Qingcheng asked to see him. "Ge..." he said, faltering. "Did... Have you known all this time?"

"...Mm."

His face blanched. "Then why...why..."

"Why didn't I ask, right?" murmured Xie Qingcheng, watching Chen Lisheng's gravestone.

No answer came.

"Why didn't I ask you back when He Yu was lost at sea—or so many times since then. Why did I never ask you?"

The caw of a crow broke from above, echoing through the courtyard. Finally, Xie Qingcheng turned to face Chen Man.

"Because I chose to trust you. I trusted a police officer. I know that you hated He Yu—that you desperately wanted to find evidence of his crimes, and you did so selfishly. However, I trusted you would never try to

frame him. Trusted that during the seizure process, you never thought of trying to hurt or kill him.”

“Xie-ge...”

“Everyone has their own selfish desires. What matters is whether they let them impact their own principles. I watched you grow up. I know you have your principles—so even though you were the last person to see He Yu, I never thought you would hurt him under the false pretense of doing your job.”

In that moment Chen Man suddenly understood why, before Xie Qingcheng left China three years ago, he only asked how He Yu had been at the end.

And why he’d dropped it in response to Chen Man’s silence.

Tears welled up in Chen Man’s eyes. Yes, part of the reason he’d gone to Guangshi had been to grow and mature, but there was another part of him that had felt as Xie Qingcheng just said. He did know that He Pharmaceuticals might have shady dealings in that market, and if He Yu really had committed any crimes, he wanted to be the one to personally arrest him.

Later, when He Yu died and his will had been released—when everyone learned that He Yu had been framed—he felt awful. Even though he’d never wanted to hurt He Yu, he still felt like some invisible arm had just backhanded him in the face. Each thing he’d learned about the He Group’s shady dealings had become a sharp claw that scraped at his conscience.

He’d wanted to tell Xie Qingcheng again and again, but dared not speak, afraid that he would misunderstand... He never imagined that he saw things so clearly right from the start.

“Don’t...don’t you suspect me?” Chen Man asked, voice quivering.

“I know you better than that,” said Xie Qingcheng.

Tears finally escaped the rims of Chen Man’s eyes. “Xie-ge...” he said, choked with piteous emotion.

“Now that I’ve told you this, the last knot in your heart should be gone. Chen Man, I hope you won’t torment yourself over what happened

three years ago. Even if you had your own reasons, you never used your position as an excuse to take petty vengeance. The reason I haven't been well for the past few years isn't because I blame anyone else—I only feel that I could've done better, and that if I had, He Yu wouldn't have met with any harm. But I failed.”

Scrubbing at his face, Chen Man shook his head. “No, Ge. That's not true.”

“You're going to sea tomorrow, to Mandela Island. That's a dangerous place.” Xie Qingcheng looked into Chen Man's eyes. “That's why I hope you won't go with any weight on your mind. And remember to take good care of yourself. Once you come home, you have to live on and live well, in memory of your brother.” His voice was very steady and very slow, suffused with the calming reassurance it held in any time of comfort.

Chen Man couldn't hold it back anymore. The lump that had formed on his heart over three long years ago finally disintegrated in one loud sob. He knew it was because Xie Qingcheng was worried about something happening to him that he'd brought this up of his own volition. To relieve him of a burden before he left. He mopped at his eyes. “Ge...thank you...”

Xie Qingcheng patted him on the shoulder, bending down to light a cigarette in front of Chen Lisheng's grave.

Twenty-three years had gone by. Was dawn truly about to break?

The graveyard was cool and quiet, yet still it felt like countless pairs of eyes were watching this young man about to head out to seek justice.

Chen Man had no idea Xie Qingcheng wasn't just clearing the air because he was worried something would happen to him—there was another aspect of the coming battle he'd made up his mind about, something that no one but the director of Meiyu knew.

On the break of dawn the following morning, the real clash began at last.

The frontline armed forces that Chen Man fought alongside were, with He Yu and other key players still on the mainland, finally taking the chance to launch a frontal assault on Mandela Island—one that had been in the making for three years and counting.

The majestic troops formed ranks, marched onto their ships, and set sail. Breaking through the water, they charged across the waves toward the island.

The vanguard of this battle numbered three thousand in total. The core staff was made up of special police, criminal police, and scientists who had all seen battle with Duan Wen—each of them commanding experienced soldiers equipped with elite weaponry. Their mission was to break into Mandela’s central fortresses as best they could, gathering intelligence in the field for those behind the front line and reaffirming their knowledge to make way for the second and third waves of reinforcements.

Zheng Jingfeng was getting on in years; he hadn’t been allowed on the frontlines, so he had become one of the key overseers of the rear echelon. Though he was just an older officer without much in the way of titles, his twenty-odd years of experience with the case gifted him a position of key command as one of the Dreambreaker Project’s major leaders.

He hadn’t gone home a single time in the past few days, stuck as he was in endless overtime.

The frontlines continued passing back intelligence. Zheng Jingfeng stared at each update sent to the command center; the eyes of everyone there were spiderwebbed with red as new information kept whirling in, building up on past information like a snowball.

“Update on the battle robot attack methods; this new model may self-destruct when beaten and immobile.”

“Analysis shows a blast radius of a kilometer. Their heads are the least likely to ignite the blast; targeting that is advised during offense.”

“Current combat data profile of the robots has reached ninety-five percent completion.”

And so on and so forth.

Though Zheng Jingfeng was an old stickler who didn’t care for milk tea, as he stared at the incoming numbers and a video feed of the frontlines—at the flying gunsmoke and bloody slaughter—he reached out for the cup of bubble tea by a technician’s wrist. Taking a big gulp, he tried to settle his worries by guzzling sugar.

“Captain Zheng, my milk tea...”

“It’s mine now. Keep on updating, don’t stop.”

The tech fell silent.

The results of the offense were remarkable. In the span of three short days, they’d already managed to map out almost half of Mandela Island. This achievement owed its success to the Fengbo recording device, designed by a mastermind in the technical department. This wrist-buckled device was capable of recording accurate battle data, automatically filming key territories and important clashes. Each of the three thousand soldiers was equipped with a Fengbo device.

“How’s the map?”

“We’ve achieved forty-two percent accuracy.”

“Excellent!” Zheng Jingfeng smacked the man’s shoulder. “Once you reach fifty percent, I’ll treat you all to a cup of milk tea.”

“...Captain Zheng,” said the tech. “You’re seriously a fucking miser.”

But their excitement was real. The map built from the Fengbo data wasn’t the same as blurry satellite imagery; the data went straight to the second wave of soldiers making landfall on the island. AI provided them with plans of attack for previously recorded targets, instructing the present force on how to deal with them. It would guide their way and help them bypass obstacles.

That was to say, the Fengbo system became their “game manual.”

The goal of the second wave in the Project Dreambreaker vanguard was to make 30 percent headway into the island in a week. Thanks to ample preparations and high soldier motivation, they’d reached 42 percent by the third day—far beyond their expectations. Even more encouragingly, losses were much lower than anticipated. These well-trained veteran soldiers displayed a powerful will to survive in the field, and their bodies of flesh and blood proved aptly capable of evading robotic offenses.

But on the fifth day, things took a sudden turn.

Late that night, a sudden cry came from someone manning a monitor in the command center, abruptly startling everyone around him.

“What’s wrong?” Zheng Jingfeng hastened over, staring fiercely at the screen.

Though he couldn’t understand the endless lines of English computer code, he’d watched the monitoring system for long enough that the sudden appearance of a line of red made cold sweat stream down his face before the question was even answered. When he heard the technician’s trembling explanation, each word stabbed deep into his heart like a spike of ice.

“Captain Zheng! The Fengbo feedback points...they suddenly... disappeared...”

Silence.

The feedback points were simply the buckles on each soldier’s wrists. They would not stop recording unless they were destroyed. But since one was worn by each and every soldier, their sudden disappearance from the map meant that—

“The vanguard...” The technician’s voice was shaking. “The vanguard soldiers...have...have been neutralized...”

A different man spoke up, face pale. “There was no footage sent back.”

A third mopped at their brow. “All communications stopped at fifty-six percent of the way into Mandela Island... We have no idea what happened...”

It was like a horror story.

An army over two thousand strong had blinked off the map, as if they were ants rather than people—wiped out entirely by the falling foot of a giant. And none of the surveillance cameras had time to capture any of what happened.

Everyone gathered around, each of them going mute at the sight of the screen.

A long time passed before anyone broke the silence. “How could this be...”

“Do we have contact with anyone at the front?”

“No, all communications have broken down...”

The commander checked the satellite feed. The soldiers had faced trouble near the central blood river of the island: a chemical, man-made river that wound its way all the way up to the central fortress, functioning as a natural defense. Toxic gasses constantly boiled off the water's surface. None of the organisms of the island dared approach, and naturally nothing grew nearby.

They'd known about the characteristics of the blood river for a long time, and they'd equipped all their soldiers with custom gas masks. Logically speaking, it shouldn't have presented a problem.

And if it was an issue that'd occurred during the forging of the river, the disconnect should've happened in stages—two thousand soldiers couldn't just go offline in the span of just a few seconds.

"Check the records. How long was it between the last communication and complete blackout?"

The tech's hands flew over the keyboard. "Sir, 2.47 seconds."

You could hear a pin drop.

2.47 seconds.

What could strike down two thousand special forces soldiers in the span of 2.47 seconds without missing a single target? Duan Wen himself was on Mandela Island, so there was no way he'd toss a nuclear weapon at his own lair—and judging from the satellite footage, no destruction at scale had happened on the island itself...

Even after three years of searching, were there still secret weapons on the island they didn't know about?

The commander's pupils shrank before the screen.

What had *happened*...?!

No news came on the sixth day.

There was still no sign of survivors by the seventh.

All the higher-ups gathered in the Dreambreaker command center, where the air was filled by the scent of anxiety and cigarette smoke. Commissar Wang had rushed to the Huzhou headquarters the morning of the sixth day, and the old man couldn't bear the strain to his schedule. His

eyes were sunken and he looked exhausted, but he refused to rest. He stared fixedly at the screens, hoping that a few surviving motes of green would appear in the field of red destruction.

But none ever did.

Two days passed without any sign of a miracle.

Terror was beginning to spread among the populace. Though there was no way for the masses to know about the Dreambreakers' classified attack on the island, the incidents caused by drugs like obedience potion and thrall-maker couldn't stay buried for long. Duan Wen's earlier experiments had been limited to leukemia patients and thus limited in scope...but things were very different with plastic surgery drugs in the mix.

Cases of sickness caused by the use of those forbidden drugs cropped up one after another. Without being injected with pure RN-13, these victims didn't end up with a pure strain of psychological Ebola the way Xie Qingcheng had, but instead with something that manifested much more violently. The most common symptom was sudden loss of rational thinking, attacking those around them. Researchers had dubbed the condition beta-strain psychological Ebola.

A few days earlier, one such victim, who hadn't been found by the police in time, had a flare-up inside a subway station. They'd beaten a senior sitting next to them so severely they were still in the hospital.

People succumbed to the terror of this illness in droves; even those who had been cured and sent home were treated with suspicion.

"Crazies should stay in the hospital where they belong."

"Why were they let out? Are you sure they're cured? Who knows when it'll flare up again? Letting them out is irresponsible to public safety!"

"They're disgusting. Imagine using illegal drugs for leukemia just because you didn't have the money—and those girls who went and got surgery just for looks? They don't have the slightest sense of duty, and now they're spreading disease like national tumors! For the safety of the country, for everyone, we should execute these irresponsible pieces of trash by firing squad!"

"That's right, they should just go and die. It's all their fault, anyway."

The situation on the island was yet unknown, but chaos had broken out in society.

On the eighth day, conflict broke out among the Dreambreakers.

The second wave of soldiers had been scheduled to head to the island the day before, aiming to rendezvous with the first, but that step had been delayed due to the unforeseen incident.

Among the higher-ups, there were those who believed the second group had to depart immediately, that there could be no further delay—otherwise the mission would fizzle and die just like that. But there was another faction who argued that without new intel on what kind of weapon could take out an entire regiment in 2.47 seconds, sending the second wave out on a rescue mission would likely result in greater losses and more needless death.

Shockingly, even though Chen Man was part of the first group and his status was still unknown, Commissar Wang had, after long deliberation, added his voice to the latter.

“We cannot send our best just to die,” he declared. “We must gather more information before sending our soldiers to the front lines.”

Another asked the commander, “Didn’t you say you’ve been hiding a trump card? Is that totally useless now, or what?”

The commander’s complexion turned ashen; he licked his lips as if he badly wanted to say something, but managed to hold his tongue.

“What if we turn the second echelon into the third?” asked Zheng Jingfeng.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...” Zheng Jingfeng, who had been thinking about this for a whole day, braced himself before continuing. “To prevent further losses, we’ll hold off on sending out the second wave. Instead, choose a few experienced volunteer soldiers—their goal will be simply to get on the island and rush the river of blood in an attempt to figure out what happened. That’s still preferable to knowing nothing.”

“I’ve had a similar thought,” said the commander. “But—”

“But?”

“Many robot soldiers and mechanized battle dogs remain, even in the parts of the island we cleared. The odds of successfully reaching the destination are very low.” He sighed. “They’ll need top-tier fitness and instincts—otherwise, if they’re caught in a fight with multiple robots, there’s no chance of returning alive.”

“I’ll go,” said Zheng Jingfeng.

Everyone fell silent, turning to look at the old cop with either shock or keenness.

“You know my background, my skill in countersurveillance, my instincts,” he said. “You know the record I’ve built in all my decades as a member of the criminal investigation team. I volunteer to lead the reconnaissance on the island.”

There was a long silence, broken by Commissar Wang. He cleared his throat, his voice marked by a touch of regret he couldn’t hide.

“Lao-Zheng, it’s true you used to be Huzhou’s strongest policeman in all respects, a veteran of the front lines...but you’re not young anymore...”

“That’s true,” Zheng Jingfeng conceded, “but I also have the most experience. I once went undercover with my squad inside a base of Burmese drug dealers; we hid there for a full four days and nights, eating only compressed biscuits without moving a muscle... Now, I can still do the same, without being discovered. No matter how brutal the circumstances, I’ll be able to endure it and go on.”

“You’ll be facing robots,” the commander said. “Lao-Zheng, that’s not something a normal person can do. You’ll be throwing your life away.”

“What’s so precious about my life? Why must we force the youth to face these risks for us?” No answer came. “I’m a frontline police officer, and have been all my life. I haven’t retired yet,” he said. “I know the chances of success are low, but I’m the best man for the job, and the cheapest pawn to lose.”

“Hey—pfft!” the commander interjected. “Lao-Zheng, don’t get hasty, you...”

But Zheng Jingfeng cut him off. “Do you know why I brought up the case of the Burmese drug lord’s den? That was the first mission I did after

graduating police academy. There were two people who hid in that pitch-black warehouse with me, staying motionless in the tiniest crevice for four days straight. One was Xie Ping, the other Zhou Muying... It's been almost forty years, but I'm the only one left alive." Tears shone in Zheng Jingfeng's perennially steely eyes. "I think now's my chance to fight at their sides one more time. The criminals they failed to capture should be mine to apprehend."

All eyes in the room looked at each other, faces filling with sorrow.

They were all veterans of the field, having had their fair share of regrets, of brothers-in-arms they'd lost held forever in their hearts. They knew what he was feeling.

The tension in the room built and built. Everyone was silent...

Suddenly, the automatic doors slid open to admit a tall and striking man, who walked out from the darkness and into the spill of the incandescent lights.

"Uncle Zheng, you're not the best man for the job."

The crowd turned in shock.

Zheng Jingfeng met the newcomer's peach-blossom eyes, staring back at him firmly and calmly.

"I am."

Chapter 209: Hello, Officer Xie

XIE QINGCHENG had never told the higher-ups about his own psychological Ebola. Today he chose to reveal this card.

He was very cautious not to breathe a word about the First Emperor, only giving examples of the special talents gifted to him and other psychological Ebola patients—like an inhuman sense of smell, or exceedingly swift powers of computation. Though the higher-ups were shocked, they didn't have the energy to question him too much more.

"What's your talent then?"

"...Adaptation," he said, after a beat of silence.

"Adaptation?" asked the commander. "But that just means you'll have an easier time of it. It won't increase your odds of success."

"This kind of adaptation isn't limited to the external environment," said Xie Qingcheng. "It also applies to the body's internal organs. To give the simplest example, the biggest risk involved with organ transplants is the potential for rejection—but that wouldn't apply to me. My body would be able to adapt to the organ entirely. It's the same with...certain illnesses or bacteria. There have been a few cases of psychological Ebola in the mainland, but they've almost all passed away. Among them, Case No. 2 had the special talent of extremely powerful hearing. Before she passed, our lab made a sample of her blood and extracted a serum from it."

"What does the serum do?"

"To regular people? Nothing. Its only use is for research. But for me —" Xie Qingcheng paused. "Once the serum enters my body, I'll adapt to it. The parts of her blood that hold that special ability will take me for Case No. 2: Which is to say, during the few hours after the blood serum is injected, I'll have her abilities."

Everyone was stunned.

“Xie Qingcheng!” cried Zheng Jingfeng. “H-how could you keep something so important from me...!”

Xie Qingcheng glanced at him. “My apologies.”

“Anyone would keep something like that under wraps,” said the commander. “Nobody wants to incur unnecessary trouble.”

Zheng Jingfeng fell silent.

Swiftly, Xie Qingcheng looked away from Lao-Zheng. The weight of the old man’s gaze was a little difficult for him to bear. The commander was wrong. Xie Qingcheng had never told him not because it would cause unnecessary trouble, but because he knew Zheng Jingfeng would react this way. He didn’t want to drag Zheng Jingfeng into his troubles, make him feel even more worry.

“So,” said Xie Qingcheng. “Will I be permitted onto the island?”

But he knew the answer well before the question left his mouth. The Dreambreakers didn’t have a better choice.

It had to be him.

“Mm, yes, the deals are complete. I’ll let Xiao-Zhou handle the rest. I’ll likely have to head back to the island soon.” In front of his computer, files and surveillance feeds displayed across the screen, He Yu brought a hand to his headset to speak to the person on the other end.

“Why?” As he repeated the other person’s question, He Yu’s notice was caught by a clip from a camera recording.

It was a motion Xie Qingcheng was making in the study of his house—and it was clear that Xie Qingcheng was observing the positioning of the camera lens. He Yu stared at it for a long time, then at the faint evidence that the books on his desk had been moved.

“No particular reason.” His expression did not bode well. He pondered the situation as he spoke evenly. “I’ve just noticed something strange about the blood toxin and wanted to practice in the labs. Get a new sense of things.”

Duan Wen said something else into the mic.

He Yu burst into contemptuous laughter and started picking his nails, voice light. “How did I notice? Well, why don’t you go ahead and ask Anthony? Didn’t he tattle on me? He came all the way to my place looking for trouble. Mm, ask him.”

After a little more idle conversation, He Yu ended the call with thoughtless acquiescence.

“Maybe in the next few days. I’ll get ready. Sure, bye.”

After that, he took off the headset and dragged the playback of the clip on his screen back to the point where Xie Qingcheng was studying the camera. As he stared at the man in the image, a notion formed in He Yu’s mind—one that made him very annoyed.

He kneaded at his temple one more time before letting out a breath, putting his headset back on with a frown to dial a different, encrypted number. “Hello? It’s me.”

After he left Dreambreaker headquarters, Xie Qingcheng didn’t have much time to prepare.

He went home one last time, to have dinner with Xie Xue and the others.

They didn’t know what Xie Qingcheng was about to do. The homestyle dinner was as casual as any other family dinner, featuring Auntie Li’s stir-fried yam greens, mapo tofu, braised pork ribs, fish balls in soup and Xie Xue’s Yangzhou fried rice. She’d learned it from Xie Qingcheng, and she made a good showing.

“Ge,” she said as they ate, “next month—and I don’t care how busy you are—you’re not allowed to work. I want to book a private family vacation for my birthday. We’ll get out and relax, okay?”

Wei Dongheng hastily joined in in his wife’s efforts. “Yeah, Ge, a vacation would be great. It’ll help you forget all th—”

Beneath the table, Xie Xue stomped on his foot.

Convincing him is one thing, but what are you doing reminding him of the past? You’re a father now—can’t you try to talk less like a dumb little teenager?

Pained, Wei Dongheng actually turned to Xie Xue and asked, “Aiyo, why’d you step on my foot?”

She stared at him, speechless.

Xie Qingcheng understood what they were getting at, but he didn’t even know where he’d be next month. Mandela Island was hell on earth, and this reconnaissance mission could well prove to be a one-way trip. He didn’t want Xie Xue and the others to worry—and the mission was fully classified—so he didn’t tell his family a thing. He merely took one last sip of soup, letting the simple warmth flow through his heart and into the rest of him.

And then he said, “Sure.”

Right before he left, he gave Yaya one last hug and thanked Auntie Li, who was washing the dishes. He even turned to Xie Xue and Wei Dongheng to tell them, “At your age, you should learn to do some housework. You need to take care of each other.”

Ever the patrician, he said things like this all the time. Wei Dongheng couldn’t tell there was anything off; the couple walked Xie Qingcheng to the door and watched him drive away.

Suddenly, Xie Xue frowned.

“What’s wrong?” asked Wei Dongheng.

“...I don’t know.” She stared at the car driving into the distance. “I just feel a tightness in my chest.”

“Is it because there’s a storm coming? It’s really humid,” Wei Dongheng said. “Go inside and sit down a while.”

Xie Xue acquiesced, but didn’t move. She stood there, watching the taillights of her ge’s car turn a corner and disappear. She was still staring as the last of that bloodred light disappeared from view.

The second place Xie Qingcheng went was Meiyu Private Hospital. The director was already waiting for him in a lab on the top floor.

There were twenty tubes of serum, rendered pale blue through the process of their refinement. The tubes were specially designed with a mechanism that sprang out a miniature injection needle, to help Xie Qingcheng administer them himself.

“Professor Xie.” The old director looked up at him. “It’s all been prepared for you—syringes for field use, very portable and easy to carry.”

Xie Qingcheng reached for them. “Thank you.”

“One moment.”

“What is it?”

“There’s something I want to show you.” The director gestured at the chair across from him. “Take a seat.”

As Xie Qingcheng sat down, the old man made to pour him a cup of hot ginger tea. Though he didn’t understand why, Xie Qingcheng still took a sip. “Director, what is it you have for me?”

The man took an envelope out from a drawer and passed it to him. Xie Qingcheng undid the string fastening, revealing a thick stack of papers inside the cardstock. A single glance at the contents stunned him still.

Across the papers, he made eye contact with the director. The old man was watching him with a smile, gesturing for him to read on.

Almost half an hour passed without a sound. Once he was finished, Xie Qingcheng placed the papers back on the desk. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

The other man only beamed.

This old director was one of Qin Ciyan’s classmates, and a roommate he’d bunked with at university—they were like brothers. Xie Qingcheng never spoke with him at length, though, and only now did he realize the man looked quite like Qin Ciyan when he smiled. Perhaps everyone from their generation of devoted academics had ended up so kindly indulgent.

But this sense of familiarity scratched at Xie Qingcheng’s heart like a cat’s claws. It even made him angry. “You should’ve told me long in advance—”

“Now do you know how those close to you will feel once they learn you’ve been hiding an illness from them?”

Xie Qingcheng fell silent. Eyes widening, he looked at the director’s face—neither he nor Qin Ciyan looked good when they smiled.

The man took that envelope back from him. The papers inside were the results of his own diagnoses, filled with lurid text—

“Late-stage lung cancer,” “spreading,” “metastasis”...

“What about your family? Do they...”

“They know.” Behind the lenses of his glasses, the director’s eyes were keen and gentle. “My wife, my children...they all know about my condition. I’ve spent a lot of time talking to them, and we agreed to face this little bump in the road together, as one unit. Our family’s made it through all sorts of troubles... War, struggle sessions, rehabilitation... We’ve lived in detention centers and been forced to wear humiliation signs, but we’ve always stayed together. Our support for each other has allowed us to overcome all kinds of difficulties.”

He rapped his knuckles on the envelope. “This might be the penultimate one, and then the last trouble we’ll face will be my death.” When he caught sight of Xie Qingcheng’s face, he grinned—not to console him, or to put up a front. It was a truly optimistic smile. “Professor Xie.”

They had an odd relationship, the two of them. They weren’t exactly close, but they were on the same wavelength, and they’d worked together on RN-13 for so many years. That was why the director still called Xie Qingcheng by his title; unlike Qin Ciyan, who’d always call him “Xiao-Xie.” But the kindly look he leveled at Xie Qingcheng now was the exact same as the one that had used to appear on Qin Ciyan’s face.

“Professor Xie, life is an endless parade of challenge and difficulty. Some crumble midway through, while others fight to the very end before one last duel with death. Human bodies will always fall to the god of death, of course. But minds aren’t the same. I’m one such example.” The director pointed at himself. “I stopped being afraid a long time ago. I never told you this, but I, too, was interrogated by an assassin sent from Mandela Island.”

Xie Qingcheng flinched.

“It’s old news now,” the director assured him. “I’m a much better actor than Qin Ciyan; they couldn’t tell there was anything off. They thought Lao-Qin just didn’t tell me much. But after that brush with death, I realized some things... I began to relish every day I spent with my family. They didn’t need to worry I was hiding anything from them, and I wouldn’t

stress over the thought of them stopping me from doing anything. It's still like that now. Our whole family will unite as one, just as we have in the face of any other challenge, to meet the fact of my illness and death."

He smiled. "In some ways, I've already defeated it. It didn't distress me in the least—I'm very happy. My family knows about it, and so do my friends, and those around me...with the exception of you."

There was no response.

"You're too smart not to know why you were the only one kept in the dark." Still smiling, the old man added some water to his ginger tea. "You're a tremendously stiff and stubborn person, Professor Xie. You possess an extremely kind and selfless heart—but at the same time, you're too egocentric. You're always trying to protect those around you in the way you deem to be proper, without thinking about whether that's what they actually want."

The man took a relaxed sip of his tea, eyes narrowing with pleasure. There was no sign of the damage his sickness had wrought on him, nor of the fact that he was on death's door. He put down his cup and folded his hands.

"I hope you'll be able to understand how they feel," he added. "Professor Xie, ever since you asked me to cure you a few years back, I've been urging you not to hide things from the ones closest to you. To give them the chance to be with you. They love you, they have the right to—but you never listened. So I stopped urging, because I also understand how you feel. Yes, it does take a certain degree of cruelty to tell those who love you most about your illness, because you know it'll make them worry. You know it'll drive them to the brink...and you love them, so you don't want them to be in any pain. You don't want their lives to stall because of you."

The director was quiet for a moment, watching Xie Qingcheng peaceably.

"But stripping them of their right to know is, in fact, more cruel. A cruelty that just might bring more regrets to both them and you... I don't know if what I'm telling you today will make you come around—this is life advice from a seventy-year-old man. Of course, in this instance, you can't tell them about a classified mission. But I hope that upon your safe return you'll be able to use a less subjective, and more honest, way of seeking

companionship from those around you while facing all of life's difficulties. Companionship is very important. It can keep your heart alive."

With that, the director handed the medication to Xie Qingcheng. "Take care of yourself, Professor Xie. We're all waiting for your return."

By the time Xie Qingcheng left Meiyu Private Hospital, there were only about three hours left before the final gathering. His heart felt very heavy, but also very calm. So many conflicting emotions filled him, but he also felt a distinct clarity.

The last thing he did was visit a gift shop and select a present for Xie Xue's birthday—a teddy bear. Xie Xue didn't want for anything anymore, but if something did happen to him on the island, he knew the plush toy would be there to comfort her.

Four years ago, when he and He Yu had been stuck in the flooded studio, He Yu had asked him if he wanted to leave a message for Xie Xue if they both died. He'd refused at the time—he said the message would only intensify the pain of those living. But now, as he walked through the darkening street with the bear clutched in his arms, he found himself heading mindlessly to a post office.

"Hello," said Xie Qingcheng. "I want to register a delayed shipment."

"Yessir, of course. This bear?"

"And a letter," said Xie Qingcheng. He paused for a moment, then added, "Sorry, two letters."

"For sure. By registered mail?"

"Yes, delayed send. Also, could you get me some letter paper and a pen? Thank you."

Two hours later, Xie Qingcheng left the post office.

He felt like a massive weight had been lifted from his heart. Inside that letter he had written everything he was allowed to tell Xie Xue, wished her a happy birthday, and added his hopes for her future.

The other...was for He Yu. He'd written down some of the things he wanted He Yu to know in the event something happened to him—he had truly bared his soul. Things he couldn't say anymore, thanks to the situation they found themselves in, but that could still be written in a letter.

As it turned out, the old director was right. Now that he'd taken care of these things he'd put off for so long, a new surge of life really did rise up in his heart. One that began to fill him with energy.

He straightened up and headed to the nearby police department.

After verifying his ID at the Project Dreambreaker command center, he headed up the elevator to the top floor. He was to join the rest of the reconnaissance squad in the penthouse conference room, where they'd take a helicopter parked on the roof to the East China Sea port to board the countersurveillance ship.

When he arrived, only the commander and his assistant were in the room.

Xie Qingcheng glanced at the clock—the meeting time had already passed. “Where’s everyone else?”

The commander didn’t answer. Instead, he had his assistant bring out a bag. “This is for you.”

The contents of the bag made Xie Qingcheng start—it was a brand-new police uniform!

The insignia on the shoulders displayed the rank his parents had held before their demotion. The cap, the badge, the boots, the belt and handcuffs...it was all there. When Xie Qingcheng’s eyes landed on the identification number sewn to the lapels, he froze in place. Not even his eyelashes moved.

“We checked the records,” the commander said. “This is a special identification code made up of both Officer Zhou and Officer Xie’s numbers. We hope it’ll bring you some comfort.”

Xie Qingcheng’s hand rose, silently—he wanted to touch the numbers, but his fingertips landed on the silver badge first. In that moment, that rainy day so many years ago seemed to reappear before his eyes. He saw the bodies of his parents next to the blazing truck, his mother’s badge crushed...

Watching Xie Qingcheng, the commander paused to bend his head and pick up the cap—

All this was totally against regulation, but these were extraordinary circumstances.

Project Dreambreaker meant terribly dangerous missions and more sacrifices than anything else, and it required extreme courage in turn. Thus, the commander had been given a greater authority, and the higher-ups didn't mind him using it to bolster someone who meant so much to the work. Such an exemption was easily made.

He personally placed the cap on Xie Qingcheng's head. Beneath the sparkling silver badge, his gaze met those sharp peach-blossom eyes.

"The changing room is right over there—we'll head to the landing pad as soon as you're changed. Your squadmate even arrived before you—he's waiting," the commander told him. "Go on. Once you're back, you can join the squadron your parents belonged to. This number's been cleared by the local department, and we'll keep it for you always. So be very careful on your mission, and make it home safe."

Xie Qingcheng looked down at the familiar badge again, so silent it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. In the end, he only nodded.

The commander patted him on the shoulder. "Go, Officer Xie. I'll wait for you to change, and then we'll go meet your partner for the mission."

"Who is it?"

"Someone you know. You'll see when we head up."

Chapter 210: Here's Something No One Else Knows

XIE QINGCHENG STARED at his own reflection.

His was a hollow-cheeked and solemn looking face, dressed in a uniform he could have recognized with his eyes closed—the badge, the cap. The belt wrapped around his strong waist, and the black leather combat boots wrapped around his long legs.

But the whole thing felt unreal, as if he were dreaming.

When he was young, he had known the scent of his parents' clothes. The fabric would always smell faintly of sweat, with traces of sunshine from being left out to dry. Sometimes it would hold the smell of ramen from the office, and, even more rarely, the metallic tang of blood.

A uniform should have a vivid, blazing scent, but his own was deeply cold. Because he'd studied medicine for so long, the icy sting of disinfectant was sunk deep into his marrow. He may have been in a police officer's uniform, but the scent coming from his neck and wrists was chilling.

Xie Qingcheng fastened the buttons of his cuffs, hiding the tattoo no policeman would ever have, and glanced at the mirror one last time before fixing his cap and heading out the door.

"Very nice. It suits you." The commander looked him up and down and nodded, pleased. "Come with me. We'll regroup with your teammates."



Following him into the elevator, Xie Qingcheng headed for the roof. The sight of the man waiting there stunned him.

So there was only one. Even more surprisingly, it was...

“Lao-Zheng?”

Zheng Jingfeng was already kitted out, waiting by the helicopter. He nodded at Xie Qingcheng, grinning at the sight of him in uniform. He gave him a thumbs-up.

Xie Qingcheng turned, features dark. The commander was just coming out of the elevator. “Are you two trying to pull some kind of national joke?”

“It’s not a joke,” said the commander. “This was our final decision. The larger the team is, the likelier the chances of discovery. So we need capable solo fighters who can work well together; you don’t know anyone else on the team, and Zheng Jingfeng is an experienced veteran police officer who’s known you for years. He’s the best choice.”

“...Did you fail to change his mind on a last-minute decision, or—”

“Xie Qingcheng, Captain Zheng is a match for any of the elite police officers you’ve worked with before. He has almost four decades of experience in the field. I know you worry about his safety, but I think you can place a little more trust in him.”

The expression on Xie Qingcheng’s face didn’t improve. How the hell could he get Lao-Zheng involved? What if something happened—

But the commander wouldn’t hear any argument. “Time’s ticking. Captain Zheng will explain the rest. Go on.”

The helicopter made its way to the harbor. Their ship was already waiting in the military port, and the two of them took up their packs and went aboard. Forty-five minutes later, the ship sliced out into the vast sea.

“From behind, you look just like your father in those clothes. Tall, broad shoulders, well-built. Manly enough for sure—little girls would love you.” Zheng Jingfeng walked up to the side of the ship and narrowed his eyes against the buffeting ocean wind, Xie Qingcheng standing right beside him.

Xie Qingcheng was still scowling, unrelieved of his worry. “Why did you insist on taking this risk?”

Zheng Jingfeng turned, but he didn’t answer the question. “You have your mother’s eyes. Pretty, but sharp as hell when you’re stern. Your mom was a woman, so it balanced out, but yours are even harsher than hers. Honestly, you should rein yourself in while you’re out, young man. Sometimes the more inflexible you are, the worse it’ll go for you. Lots of criminals are hard to understand. When you glare at them with such pretty razor-edge eyes, like it’s some kind of intimidation tactic, you might set them off more.”

He laughed. “Just giving you some tips for the mission. A habit from having mentees around, kicking in at the sight of you in your shiny new uniform. I’m giving you some advice as an old-timer, so you’d best listen up.”

Xie Qingcheng turned away to stare out at the ocean. The awkward atmosphere intensified.

With a cough, Zhen Jingfeng determinedly looked for a new topic. “By the way, Officer Xiao-Xie, did I ever tell you about the first time I properly met your parents?”

Xie Qingcheng remained impassive. Looking to ease the tension, Zheng Jingfeng launched into his story. “It was the year of our graduation. The department was in charge of a drug trafficking case in the Golden Triangle at the time, and the drug lord’s connections extended as far as the local police system. To keep mission details from getting leaked, the department head selected outstanding graduates from different police academies and sent those young people, not yet formally inducted into the system, as undercover agents into the Golden Triangle.”

The ocean was pitch-black. Zheng Jingfeng gazed out at that endless abyss as he recounted a story he told very rarely.

“Your parents and I were the ones chosen. The three of us were formed into a small team, and our mission was to infiltrate their warehouse base and record footage of them working with a wealthy businessman from the mainland.

“We went through plenty of trouble to get there, but we finally successfully hid ourselves in the warehouse, where we tucked ourselves into a corner to settle in and wait for the merchant’s arrival. The reports said he was sure to arrive in the Golden Triangle within twenty-four hours, and he’d be coming to this warehouse to personally inspect the goods. However...” Zheng Jingfeng paused. “There were unforeseen circumstances. The merchant came late; he was nowhere to be seen on the first day. Same for the second and the third. Your mother had learned some Burmese—she could tell the drug traffickers were worried, thinking he was going to ditch the goods. By then, we were running low on food and water. The mission should’ve only been for one day, and we were already on the third. We split our rations across three days, but we knew continuing on like this would mean our deaths.”

The story had finally caught Xie Qingcheng’s attention. “...What happened?”

“Your mom wanted us to retreat, to avoid taking risks and making unnecessary sacrifices. But your dad said no. He familiarized himself with the drug lord’s behavior before we arrived; he knew the man was extremely cunning, and suspected he’d delayed the meeting with the merchant on purpose. He thought we should wait a few more days.”

The wrinkles of Zheng Jingfeng’s eyes seemed to extend as he spoke, the faint smile lines turning to vivid silhouettes from his youth. It was like he could hear the youthful voices of his two comrades again...

“A few more days?” said a young Zhou Muying. “We won’t even have the strength to leave the base and report back in a few days. You’re not being a hero, you’re being an idiot.”

“My psychological profiling has never been wrong,” said Xie Ping. “I’m sure this is a trick.”

Flushed with rage, Zhou Muying glared at the scoundrel. “You Huzhou bastard, you son of a bitch—you think you’re taking a final exam? And can you even understand Burmese? They’re not putting on an act at all! They’re just as mad—”

“You’re wrong. They’re just underlings; they don’t know what’s happening. Of course they’re mad—the higher-ups haven’t even shown up.” Xie Ping remained focused on the minions walking around outside.

He was the extremely rational, focused, and quiet type, the kind of cadet who seemed almost clumsy with other people. After studying the environment surrounding them for a while, when both Zheng Jingfeng and Zhou Muying thought he wouldn't say anything else, he added, with complete sincerity, "I don't discriminate by gender, Officer Zhou. If you would please not discriminate by hometown, as well? Not all Huzhou men are bastards."

Zhou Muying was speechless. "Ending up on a team with you must be karmic punishment..."

Xie Qingcheng hadn't heard many stories of his parents from before they were married; this was the first he'd ever heard about what their relationship was like before they got together. Though he was still upset over this personal risk Zheng Jingfeng was taking, that wasn't enough to curb his curiosity about his parents.

"...Did they dislike each other back then?"

Zheng Jingfeng looked down and laughed. "I don't know about your dad. He was a stuffy one—always did everything extremely by the book. You mom really did hate him at the time."

"What about you?"

"Me?" Captain Zheng was quiet, a smile filling his eyes. Too many past events had sunk into them, and now they looked deeper than the seas themselves. "I was the mediator. My job was to stop them from fighting.

"Eventually they listened to me, and they each took a step back. We agreed to wait one more day. It was a hard wait; there was only a small piece of biscuit left, and Xie Ping was in a sullen mood thanks to what your mom said to him. I don't think he was very sure of himself, so he gave himself the very smallest chunk of the bar and us the larger pieces, hoping that time would pass faster...only for the merchant to actually appear on the fourth day. We got the recording, and accomplished the goal we set out to achieve; but while we were leaving, Xie Ping fainted from hunger."

Xie Qingcheng blinked.

"Your mom and I took turns carrying him home, all the way through a forest. He woke up halfway, and weakly asked your mom to put him down... I remember the sky was filled with stars that night. The second we

made it out of the danger zone we collapsed in a meadow and stared up at the night sky, and somebody started laughing, I don't know who. We all just lay there on the ground, laughing as we looked at the stars..." Zheng Jingfeng paused. "It's been forty years, but I've never seen stars shine so bright.

"Xiao-Xie, you never understood why I didn't want you involved. I kept telling you that you're not a police officer, that it wasn't your place. Maybe you hated me, for having to do everything by the rules—so much so that we missed a lot of opportunities, and let the case go unsolved for twenty years straight. Maybe...you can understand a little more of what I've been feeling now. I already lost my comrades in arms once. I can only ever hear their laughter in my dreams now. I don't want to lose anyone else."

There was only silence from Xie Qingcheng.

Zheng Jingfeng reached out and patted him on the shoulder. "Xiao-Xie, I've also been waiting for an answer, for the first light of dawn—but there's so much I've gone through that you don't know about. I had no choice but to be cautious...but I've never been numb. I stayed on the front lines for over thirty years; I let every chance of promotion go, and I never retreated, just because my daybreak hadn't yet come."

He met Xie Qingcheng's peach-blossom eyes, and his pupils slowly darkened. "I've never gone numb... Never."

"Lao-Zheng..."

"I have to go with you to Mandela Island. If this is the last fight of my life, I'll still die happy, because..." Zheng Jingfeng looked down at the code on Xie Qingcheng's chest, gilded in silver. The sight of those familiar numbers filled his eyes with tears. "Because, forty years later, I get to be at their side again. Xiao-Xie, I hope you can understand my decision."

Xie Qingcheng stood there on the deck. He'd already injected himself with the blood serum inside the cabin, and he was wearing just the pale blue summer uniform shirt, coat thrown over his shoulders in deference to the cold. The wind rustled loudly through the jacket. He fixed Zheng Jingfeng with a long stare. "...You have to be careful once we're on the island. You're a grandfather, not the sprightly young man you once were."

Zheng Jingfeng understood what Xie Qingcheng was getting at. He looked up at him, beaming with too much emotion to describe. “Really? I suddenly feel eighteen again.”

“More like eight.” Rolling his eyes, Xie Qingcheng took hold of his jacket and left the deck for the warmth of the cabin. His parting words were, “Xiao-Zheng, you better listen to me once we’re on the island! Run when I tell you to, and hide when I say so—or I’ll drop you the second we land, do you hear me?”

“...Little brat...” muttered Zheng Jingfeng.

A few hours later, the ship finally made it to the source of all evil—Mandela Island.

Because their vessel had to be disguised as a normal passing cruise ship to avoid the attention of the island’s observation tower, the two of them were going to have to dive into the icy waters at the closest point of their route and swim the rest of the way. Xie Qingcheng injected himself with RN-13 one last time before he left, to temporarily bring back his strength. Then he and Lao-Zheng put on their special diving gear and slowly swam toward that behemoth of the ocean.

The Dreambreaker Project was considerate: The diving suits were set up like self-heating flotation devices; they resembled sleeping bags. All they had to do was steer them, and it didn’t take too much energy to make it through the journey of roughly ten nautical miles.

“We’re here.”

The bags touched soft sand. Peeling off their suits, Xie Qingcheng and Zheng Jingfeng took a whiff of the bloody air of Mandela Island. The beach was littered with the rusty remains of machines from earlier battles, framed against a backdrop of ruined buildings, trees, and bloodstains.

“Fengbo navigation system activated. We are presently situated in the eastern part of the island, coordinates 12, 34.” Each of them wore mics at their ears and Fengbo buckles around their wrists. The system activated as soon as they were on the island, giving them warnings and directions. “Mission objective: infiltration and reconnaissance. Target destination is the blood river. Please head straight toward twelve o’clock and enter the Black Forest.”

Zheng Jingfeng took a breath and turned to Xie Qingcheng. “Let’s go.”

“One moment.”

Xie Qingcheng took out a syringe of Case No. 2’s blood serum, but Zhen Jingfeng stopped him.

“Didn’t you already inject yourself on the ship? Overusing something like that can’t be good for you...”

“That was a test dose. The effects have faded by now.” He twisted out the needle and injected himself without blinking an eye.

Gritting his teeth, he felt it as his blood carried the drug throughout his whole body. He closed his eyes as his hearing sharpened exponentially. Frequencies normal people could never detect now reached him; he could even hear the writhing of bugs on their leaves in the forest.

All that noise being suddenly amplified was not a pleasant sensation. It was like someone forcing all the world’s radio waves into a single satellite receiver. Even during the testing stage, the overwhelming volume had rendered him faint. But he was the First Emperor, and his unique constitution allowed him to swiftly adapt to the feeling. This time, during the actual mission, nausea swept through him but he swiftly recovered.

“How do you feel?” asked Zheng Jingfeng.

Pale, Xie Qingcheng took a deep breath. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

The serum was very effective. They followed the Fengbo system’s instructions all the way north, avoiding the remaining mechanized soldiers and robot dogs before arriving on the bank of the river where the first wave lost contact.

Xie Qingcheng and Zheng Jingfeng stopped stiffly. The scene that lay before them left both of them stunned.

Chapter 211: Faced with an Overwhelming Enemy

MUCH OF THE RIVER of blood was frozen.

In that moment, its shores resembled a city frozen in time for centuries—everything enveloped in chilling ice.

The first vanguard was entirely sealed within it. It must have happened in an instant; they were still locked in the same positions they'd held during the initial charge.

"The freezing occurred very quickly." Zheng Jingfeng studied the face of the soldier closest to them. The man's face was very calm; he'd been looking down at the magazine of his gun. "If they had enough time to react, we'd be seeing shocked expressions on their faces. This tells us they were frozen faster than humans can react. The surveillance system said everyone went offline within 2.47 seconds, but from what we can see, the soldiers were flash-frozen in less than a second. 2.47 seconds is just how long it took for the Fengbo system to stop working."

Suddenly, Xie Qingcheng pulled him close and dragged him behind a massive tree, shushing him.

With his extremely sensitive hearing, Xie Qingcheng could sense distant noises long before they were near. The two of them held their breath, focusing hard from behind the tree. After a long moment, a metal bridge appeared across the misty river of blood. A group of robot soldiers clanked over the thick blanket of snow, their footsteps loud and metallic as they approached. Their artificial eyes were two spots of eerie green light.

The one at the vanguard came to a stop, alloy metal head spinning 360 degrees to study its surroundings. After a few seconds, it said stiffly: "No enemies detected. Commence transport."

And so the robots behind it reached out with metal arms and lifted the frozen soldiers like they were moving cargo, setting them atop their shoulders and heading back along the bridge to disappear into the snowstorm.

“They’re...”

Xie Qingcheng reached up to silence Zheng Jingfeng. He lowered his eyelashes, holding his breath and listening to what others could never hope to hear. A few minutes later, he dropped his hand from Zheng Jingfeng’s mouth and opened his eyes.

“I heard two people speaking. One must be an apostle of the fortress, while the other is probably the inventor of the robots, Zoya.” His expression was stern as he recounted what he’d heard. “Zoya said she’d have the robots bring the soldiers to the fortress to defrost them at the research center. She told the apostle not to worry, or to send anyone to help, because she’s flash-frozen them with her frost laser. Before they’re defrosted using her equipment, they can only be handled at speeds, pressure, and angles specified to the robots, otherwise the ice would be damaged and they’d die once they’re defrosted.”

“Meaning they’re not dead?” asked Zheng Jingfeng.

Xie Qingcheng nodded. “As long as they’re not touched or injured recklessly, they can be defrosted. Based on their conversation, Zoya means to ship them back to the fortress as human test subjects. She doesn’t want to kill them all yet.”



“And that ‘frost laser’...”

“It’s probably the special weapon that managed to freeze the entire first wave. Light does, in fact, travel much faster than human reaction times. If they were blasted with a special wavelength that froze them into pillars of ice in seconds, everything makes sense.”

The Fengbo system relayed everything he said back to the base as he slowly walked out from behind the tree. Zoya was still instructing the robot soldiers to bring the victims back to the fortress; Xie Qingcheng could tell they were heading into the distance, their voices gradually fading.

For now, they were safe. No enemies were approaching.

“We need more information on the flash-freeze frost laser,” said Xie Qingcheng. “Otherwise, the result will be the same no matter how many people we send.”

“If they had something this powerful, why have they never used it before?”

“It was probably only recently finished. Even organization insiders don’t seem to know much about this weapon.”

“Any idea what we should do?” asked Zheng Jingfeng. “How are we going to get that information?”

“We wait.”

“Wait?”

“Mandela Island is too large to search,” said Xie Qingcheng. “But Zoya was just talking about only transporting the soldiers with predetermined angles, pressure, and speed to keep them from being injured. If what she said was true, they’re going to need to reactivate the frost laser once they’re back at the fortress in order to defrost them. Also, the ground here...” Xie Qingcheng scanned the wintry scene. “They can’t leave it frozen forever. They’ll need to activate the laser to melt it, and given the blast radius, it must be able to reach miles down the river. Freezing more than two thousand people at the speed of light is something they couldn’t possibly achieve quietly.”

Xie Qingcheng paused. “There’ll be a massive commotion once it reactivates. We can wait. And then...we’ll figure out where it’s installed on

the island.”

Zheng Jingfeng’s eyes lit up. “You’re right,” he said softly.

A less experienced or newer officer might not have understood Xie Qingcheng’s certainty. They’d probably ask why Xie Qingcheng trusted that Zoya would swiftly defrost the frozen men. What if she was a lunatic who wanted to store them in the freezer like cabbages for a big New Year feast? What if she liked ice statues, and wanted them as auspicious decorations?

But Zheng Jingfeng wasn’t like that. He instantly understood how likely it was that Xie Qingcheng’s plan would succeed. If it was the first time the Mandela Organization had used the weapon to freeze so many people, and the island was teeming with mad scientists, they could hardly resist defrosting them at the first opportunity to see the results.

To scientists, that thrill at the moment of success was akin to a tsunami in the brain. They wouldn’t be able to resist the temptation to look at the results, the same way an addict couldn’t refuse an offering of high-grade heroin.

So the two waited.

It was very cold, and their clothes couldn’t exactly be described as thick. Zheng Jingfeng could handle it, but Xie Qingcheng was suffering. He closed his eyes, leaning silently against a tree trunk, listening to the noises around them and trying to endure the chill that ate into his bones.

“Aren’t you cold?” asked Xie Qingcheng.

“I’m fine. It’s not that bad.”

And so Zheng Jingfeng was tricked.

Xie Qingcheng had been healthy as a horse during childhood. His blood ran so hot he could follow his parents around in just a thin jacket in the middle of winter, so Zheng Jingfeng didn’t question it.

The only person who knew how sick he truly was right now was He Yu.

That was why he’d given Xie Qingcheng that Charmander. He wanted to please him, to earn the opportunity to warm his bed. The thought of the toy made Xie Qingcheng feel a stifling tightness in his chest.

It was shattered now. And the person who gave it to him had probably forgotten its origin long ago. He was the only one who still remembered.

After a moment, Zheng Jingfeng was suddenly startled by the sight of his complexion. “Why do you look so pale...? Is the serum hurting you?”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t answer straight away. Overcome by nausea, he kept his eyes shut and stayed silent.

“Xiao-Xie?”

“I’m fine. Don’t bother me. I’ll be fine after some rest.”

It wasn’t just his discomfort with the cold. There was another side effect of the serum, but it was an extremely awkward one, and Xie Qingcheng didn’t want to talk about it with other people.

His body would naturally adapt to the serum, enough to be convinced that he was the serum’s progenitor...and thus make changes in response to it. In short, his whole body began to recognize itself as Case No. 2.

And Case No. 2, unfortunately, had been pregnant when the serum samples were taken.

The child had been stillborn, and the mother ultimately sank into her grief. Xie Qingcheng had a lot of sympathy for her, and tried not to talk about her case. But that wasn’t his problem right now. The biggest problem right now was that while the serum heightened his hearing, it also impacted him the way pregnancy had impacted her. His body was reproducing her weariness, weakness, and nausea.

These phantom symptoms weren’t especially serious. They faded as the effects of the drug did, and Xie Qingcheng could make it through any kind of discomfort—but now, embroiled in this already-grating wait, the feeling gnawed at him uncomfortably.

Thankfully, the parade of robot soldiers finally stopped entirely by midnight, clanking footsteps turning to silence.

Coming back to his senses, Xie Qingcheng listened carefully. There was only one person’s footsteps in the snow—it was probably Zoya. She slowly moved deeper into the base...

“How is it?” whispered Zheng Jingfeng, leaning against the trunk.

“Gone,” said Xie Qingcheng. “Disappeared southeast. I can’t hear it anymore.”

“We’ll know within the hour if she activates the frost laser.”

“Mm,” said Xie Qingcheng. Suddenly, he turned to cough violently, overcome by nausea.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Panting, he took out another syringe of serum and one of RN-13, injecting them into his own pale blue veins with a grimace.

Zheng Jingfeng watched all this with worried eyes, but he knew he couldn’t stop him. Xie Qingcheng had no choice; this was the only way they could get the information the Dreambreakers needed, the information that might bring them that final victory.

“Does it hurt a lot?”

“It’s okay,” said Xie Qingcheng, disposing of the used syringes. “My pain tolerance is pretty high.”

“...You’ve started putting on airs since you were a kid.” Zheng Jingfeng sighed, handing him his insulated bottle of hot tea. “Have something to warm you up.”

After a pause, Xie Qingcheng took it. “Thank you.”

In the darkness, Zheng Jingfeng began to laugh, watching his shadowed figure with his black eyes. “Fuck’s sake, it’s been ages since you thanked me for anything. Only when you were little, before anything happened to your parents... After that, you either scowled or yelled whenever you saw me.”

Xie Qingcheng took a gulp of the tea and handed it back. He coughed once more, the heat of his breath melting into the cold wind. As expected, he was scowling. “Put less tea leaves in next time. It’s too strong...”

Just as Zheng Jingfeng was about to respond, he was interrupted by a sharp shrill. What followed was a blinding white light that pierced the skies like a firebomb, shooting up from the fortress fast as a ball of lightning. Zheng Jingfeng and Xie Qingcheng both rose at once, their eyes fixed on the source of that devilish projection.

“That’s the weapon! The flash-freeze frost laser!”

The beam was extremely swift and disappeared almost instantly, but there was still a smoking mark left in the sky—as if the heavens themselves had been wounded.

“Five o’clock,” said Xie Qingcheng. As he’d just injected RN-13, his mind was perfectly clear. His computational ability now rivaled a computer’s; he and Fengbo calculated the coordinates of the frost laser almost simultaneously. “Five o’clock, about two point seven miles away. Based on our existing Mandela Island map, the installation is...near the entrance of the labyrinth.” Xie Qingcheng uploaded the information to the Fengbo system’s cloud and turned to Zheng Jingfeng. “Let’s go.”

It wasn’t exactly next door, but it wasn’t too far. The two of them took off in the direction of their target. But with less than a mile to go, Xie Qingcheng came to a sudden stop.

“Guard robots up ahead.”

“Near the frost laser?”

He nodded. His slender hand, clad in black military fingerless gloves, pressed to the inner curve of his ear. He closed his eyes, focusing. “Two of them. Likely Zoya’s guards.”

“Seems normal,” said Zheng Jingfeng. “It’d be odd if there weren’t any.”

“All we can do is fight.”

Zheng Jingfeng agreed, pulling up information from the Fengbo system about the robots to review. “It’s best if we can avoid their notice—ideally, if we can snipe them from a distance. These robots can self-destruct, and it’s likely they’ll send footage of us back to Zoya. The second she knows we’re near the frost laser installation, she’ll definitely come back, and it’ll be a real tough situation for us.”

Xie Qingcheng furrowed his brow. “Sounds quite difficult. These robots can pick up on any movement within twenty-six hundred feet, exactly the range of most modern sniper rifles. It’ll be very hard to get a headshot at that distance.”

But after staring out through his binoculars for a moment, Zheng Jingfeng just said, “Hand it to me.”

“...I know you used to be the best police sniper in the city, but hitting a robot head barely half the size of a normal target at twenty-six hundred feet isn’t something you can do.”

“Brat, don’t underestimate your uncle.” With a grin, Zheng Jingfeng set his jaw and set about adjusting his firearm.

This rifle had been specially designed for him by the Dreambreakers. Xie Qingcheng didn’t shoot, so he had no idea what the other man was doing, but Zheng Jingfeng was a cautious one, rarely the risk taker. Since he was so confident, Xie Qingcheng did nothing to stop him—only stared at his every move, awaiting the reveal of what the hell he thought he was doing.

Getting ready to move, the two of them crouched down and made their way forward through a dimly lit path. The Fengbo system continuously updated them on their distance from the target.

2,700 feet, 2,650 feet...2,610 feet...

Caution came first. Zheng Jingfeng stopped at 2,610 feet, not wanting to risk the sensor radius at 2,600. Holding his breath, he set up his gun and peered through the sight to center on the robots’ profiles. The black hole of the barrel slowly positioned itself, taking aim at the target...

Though he was older than he once was, decades on the front lines had kept him in top shape. He wasn’t rusty in the slightest; his hands were perfectly steady.

He took aim once more, setting up the shot.

One second passed. Another.

His heart pounded as he counted in silence.

Three—

Bang! A muffled noise rang from the silencer. The bullet headed straight for the robot soldiers, catching their attention the moment it passed the 2,600 foot threshold. Through his night vision binoculars, Xie Qingcheng watched the two react instantly—they dodged almost the instant the trigger was pulled!

Clang!

Xie Qingcheng's blood ran cold.

He'd missed... The bullet had missed, landing harmlessly on the ground between the robots—who both turned, green eyes glaring straight at their location!

At the same time, the Fengbo system finally registered the hostile robots and produced a sharp warning in both Zheng Jingfeng and Xie Qingcheng's headsets:

“System target identified: Berserker robots! The swiftest and most lethal of any mechanized soldier. Estimated combat capacity: One hundred thirty men!”

A hundred and thirty men...and they were only two...

A deathly pall fell across Xie Qingcheng's face. “Lao-Zheng!” he snapped. “Run!”

But for some reason, Zheng Jingfeng didn't move a muscle. Instead, he pinned Xie Qingcheng down—holding him in place even as the berserker soldiers turned, ready to attack.

“Lao-Zheng?!” cried Xie Qingcheng.

“Don't move,” said Zheng Jingfeng. “You won't make it.”

Chapter 212: Trust Your Teammates

XIE QINGCHENG DIDN'T UNDERSTAND—if he couldn't escape, did that mean he should just stand there? Stand there and wait to die?!

The thought only lasted a moment. In the next instant, a dazzling light burst out at the base of the frost laser—a flash bomb.

The bullet Zheng Jingfeng had loaded into the magazine wasn't an ordinary bullet, but a flash bomb engineered by the Dreambreakers. The projectile would explode within three seconds of its bright light fizzling out, and the only way to stop it was to pull out the blinding, burning fuse. In a flash, the two berserker robots came to the same realization. They twisted their steel bodies with inhuman speed, rushing toward the flash bomb.

Three, two—

A deafening *boom* rang out. Zheng Jingfeng was fine, but Xie Qingcheng's high-frequency hearing caused him a lot of pain. It was so jarring that his chest heaved, and he grabbed the tree next to him for balance.

The smoke dispersed, and Xie Qingcheng raised his binoculars to witness a frightening scene. The two berserker robots had pulled out the fuse at the last second, ensuring that though there was still an explosion, it didn't cause the large-scale casualties a flash bomb normally would. The robots had surrounded the flash bomb with their steel bodies right before the explosion. Now, they lay sideways across the ground, the control remote in their hands completely destroyed. Scorched scrap steel littered the impact site.

Xie Qingcheng finally understood what Zheng Jingfeng had been trying to do.

The shot hadn't been aimed to destroy the violent killer robot. There were two of them, and even if he really had hit one in the head, he wouldn't have been able to prevent the other one from finding them. It took at least a

hundred thirty people to handle one robot; they'd have no chance facing it alone.

In that critical moment, Zheng Jingfeng had demonstrated his incredible wit as an old criminal policeman who'd been in service for decades—he might not have been as physically powerful as he used to be, but he'd still got it. He had skills that the youth simply didn't.

He realized that the reason the berserkers had been left here was to protect the frost laser, and so he could use a flash bomb to trick them into deactivating. Just as he'd expected, they turned back to block the explosion, sacrificing their sensors in the process—and rendering them paralyzed.

One bullet and three seconds was enough to kill two of the terrifying “berserker robots” of Mandela Island. This was the combat skill of an experienced policeman: Zheng Jingfeng.

He leaned against the tree trunk, putting down his binoculars as he leaned over and laughed hoarsely. “Fuck...I haven't felt that exhilarated in a long time. I feel eighteen again...”

In contrast, Xie Qingcheng looked like his senior. “...Xiao-Zheng, can you remind me to cover my ears next time?”

Zheng Jingfeng laughed and waved his hands. “Sorry, sorry.”

They supported each other as they moved forward, coming to an open field at the entrance of the Black Forest maze. The two robots lay there, unmoving.

Every instruction in or out had to go through a device fixed to their hands. With that device destroyed, the berserkers had no more commands, and no idea what they were supposed to do. When they saw Zheng Jingfeng and Xie Qingcheng approach, they turned their heads to lock their dark green electronic eyes blankly on them.

Xie Qingcheng put his gun to the head of one of them, but it didn't react—it was as if it had been changed from a violent beast to a docile rabbit.

He was speechless.

Right as he was about to shoot, to completely destroy this twisted weapon, the Fengbo system sounded in his ear. “These robots are the most

powerful combatants on Mandela Island. There are very few of them, and we only have data on ten. Every robot has a different combat style—we are currently uploading this robot’s details. Please wait...”

“It means, don’t kill it?” Xie Qingcheng frowned. “Because subjects are rare, and data analysis still needs to be done?”

The thrill of the earlier experience had turned the taciturn Zheng Jingfeng into a chatterbox. “You have better hearing than me, so that must be right.”

“...You really have turned back into an eighteen-year-old,” Xie Qingcheng said. Adjusting Fengbo’s data input, he scanned the two robots again and requested, “Confirm safety.”

The Fengbo system replied, “The control sensors of the robots have been completely destroyed, and they cannot receive orders from their creator. However, their combat power is unchanged. According to previous data, this robot is capable of independent thought—but unless triggered, it will not cause harm.”

The frown on Xie Qingcheng’s face deepened as he listened.

...Independent thought?

Did Zoya have the technological capacity to give these advanced robots the ability to think...?

The biggest difference between robots and humans was that robots shouldn’t have their own emotions, their own thoughts. If they did, it could cause all manner of complications that violated human ethics. In normal society, scientists had to follow strict laws and regulations in the course of research and invention to avoid unsavory outcomes. But this was Mandela Island—there were no rules or constraints.

This was a place where ideas and technology could proliferate wildly.

The gun remained pointed at one of the robots. After that initial blank stare, it seemed to come back to its senses, round dark green eyes locking onto Xie Qingcheng. It tilted its head, swiveling its eyes as if wondering why there was a gun pointed at it.

Xie Qingcheng was deeply unnerved.

If these berserkers really had thoughts and feelings akin to a human, even at the level of a child, then what was the difference between killing one of them and killing a person?

The berserker seemed to sense his thoughts. It lifted its busted hand, shook it twice at Xie Qingcheng, then slowly raised it to the side of its head.

The explosion had all but shattered the hand, so it was only a partial gesture. Xie Qingcheng couldn't tell what it wanted to express, and it only made him more uncomfortable. The action was so like a human's that it gave him a strong sense of *déjà vu*, as if he'd seen someone familiar do something similar.

Zheng Jingfeng spoke, cutting through his daze. "My Fengbo tested it too. This berserker isn't very aggressive. We should record its data."

Slowly, Xie Qingcheng lowered the muzzle of his gun.

When it saw he wasn't going through with killing it, it tilted its head some more and repeated the gesture with its arm. For whatever reason, this annoyed Xie Qingcheng, and he put his gun away. "Record the data here," he said to Zheng Jingfeng. "I'll go collect equipment specs from the frost laser."

Since the frost laser had to be fired into the open air, it was placed at the exit of the Black Forest, less than three hundred feet from their patrolling berserkers. Zoya, its creator, appeared to be a woman with strong aesthetic sensibilities. If Xie Qingcheng and the captain hadn't identified it beforehand, they never would have thought that the structure in front of him now was a terrifying weapon that could freeze anything instantly from thousands of miles away.

The thing was ethereally beautiful. At first glance, it looked like an ice sculpture of a small mountain at the edge of the Black Forest, flashing with crystal clear light. On one side of the device was a narrow door, presumably leading to the central core.

The door was equipped with a biometric lock, keeping it shut without proper verification. But for Xie Qingcheng, that wasn't a problem. Fengbo was connected to the best scientists and programmers the Dreambreakers had to offer, and could get past a small obstacle like this within minutes.

While headquarters was deciphering and unlocking the security system, Xie Qingcheng's eyes dimmed.

A scene just like this had played out several years ago.

Back then, he'd found himself in the basement of Zhilong Entertainment, with He Yu following him and easily deciphering the code of the biometric lock...

He closed his eyes and stopped thinking about it. He suppressed his memories of He Yu, gathered his focus, and used this time to record the various aspects of the frost laser's externals using Fengbo. He sent it back to headquarters.

Four minutes later, headquarters sent over a code to destroy the biometric lock.

The lock opened...and Xie Qingcheng turned around. "Lao-Zheng, come here."

Zheng Jingfeng had just finished collecting detailed data on the two berserkers. He gestured to Xie Qingcheng and was about to walk over when suddenly—

"Watch out!" Xie Qingcheng's pupils shrank. Just as Zheng Jingfeng turned around, one of the berserkers' eyes flashed, its hand rising at lightning speed and stabbing toward his back. "Lao Zheng—!"

There was an instant where his heart almost stopped. Xie Qingcheng didn't even have time to grab his gun to pacify it. He could only watch as the berserker's mechanical arm swung down...

And then—

"Fuck! What's going on?!" Zheng Jingfeng turned around as he felt his head turn cold.

The berserker had raised its arm again.

As Xie Qingcheng and Zheng Jingfeng watched on, stunned, the berserker that was about to "attack" Zheng Jingfeng didn't actually do anything bad. In the end all it did was grab his hat. It tilted its head, looking at it with interest.

The two of them were speechless.

“It seems to like your police hat a lot...”

“Yes...”

But they had no time to analyze the strange behavior of a robot that was no longer being controlled directly. According to the existing data, Zoya prized the berserker robots above all else. Every one of them was directly connected to her. Now that the two robots guarding the frost laser had lost connection to that central brain, Zoya might realize the issue at any time. They had to hurry to transmit all of the data on the frost laser to headquarters before Zoya noticed the situation and rushed over to deal with it herself. Headquarters needed to understand this new secret weapon.

As two men entered the control room, the scene inside gave them quite the shock. They’d assumed it would be filled with electronics and equipment, but the interior of the frost laser had no exposed machinery. Instead the walls were covered in large projection screens, with countless brilliant stars flashing across them. Under that sky was an open space that emanated a faint blue light—the ground was like a mirror, or perhaps ice; they couldn’t identify the material. And in the center of the room stood a little girl.

“This is...” began Zheng Jingfeng.

“This isn’t a real person. There isn’t a third heartbeat here,” said Xie Qingcheng as he walked forward to get a closer look at the girl.

As he expected, she was just a holographic projection, an image so realistic that you could even see the pale blue blood vessels under her snow-white skin. She didn’t appear to see them. She only walked around the frost laser holding a bunny doll, daydreaming, singing, or looking down to play with her waterfall of golden hair.

“I can’t tell where the control is...” Zheng Jingfeng said. “There’s not even a button here.”

He reached out to touch the wall, blinking with stars. “It’s not a touchscreen, either. I thought I’d be able to open it by swiping at it like my phone... Oh, wait! On the wall, these don’t seem to be...stars?” He leaned in and looked closely, exclaiming a few seconds later, “Fuck, it’s some kind of equation!” He quickly lifted his head and looked across the dome of the

walls and ceiling. “All these flashing lights are the values that the frost laser is using to operate!”

Xie Qingcheng’s poor eyesight was a hindrance to him here. He walked up to the wall and took a close and careful look until he was eventually able to make out the numbers, small as ants. The numbers kept changing, running automatically and autonomously, making them look like a sky full of twinkling stars.

“All this is beyond our comprehension,” said Xie Qingcheng. It felt like he was standing at the end of a vast universe, looking out at the code for Genesis. The nebula exploded and scattered before his eyes, forming a cryptic tale beyond the understanding of any ordinary humans, individual lives insignificant as dust.

He lifted his Fengbo contact point and began recording data to send back to the organization—but the commander’s voice sounded in his ear a few minutes later.

“Xie Qingcheng, is this the control room of the new weapon?” There was an obvious trace of worry in his voice.

“Yes. What’s wrong?”

“There’s too much data! Fengbo’s processing speed can’t keep up with it!”

“...Then what should we do?”

“We’ll have to temporarily increase Fengbo’s computing power, but our technicians have already expanded its channels to the maximum capacity. If you and Lao-Zheng’s Fengbos are turned on at the same time, it should take fifteen minutes for them to complete the data collection and successfully transmit it to the host computer in Huzhou.”

“So for thirty minutes, my system and Lao Zheng’s system will be used to collect and transmit data—not for combat, correct?”

“Yes. Can you do it?”

“It should be possible, as long as...” Before Xie Qingcheng could finish, though, his sensitive ears picked up a subtle sound, and his face turned pale. “No! The situation has changed—it’s going to be difficult! We’ll just have to try our best. Zoya seems to have found out that someone

entered her new weapon's control room. I hear a group of combat robots approaching us."

Zheng Jingfeng and the commander asked, almost simultaneously, "How many are there?"

"No less than fifty."

The situation had suddenly turned dire. It was practically impossible for Xie Qingcheng and Zheng Jingfeng to fight fifty combat robots, and that might only be the vanguard. If Zoya found out they could fight back, she would only send more to join the battle. But giving up on these results to flee the scene was a bad idea—if they escaped, it would be virtually impossible to come back to collect data on the laser.

In that critical moment, Zheng Jingfeng made a decision. He took off his Fengbo bracelet and handed it to Xie Qingcheng, leaving only the watch on his wrist.

"I'll go outside and try to buy you some time. After the data is collected, come out and we'll escape together."

Xie Qingcheng didn't say anything. He made it sound so easy, but... fighting fifty combat robots for fifteen minutes without the help of the Fengbo system—and alone?

It was like Zheng Jingfeng had heard his thoughts. "I won't be facing them directly for too long," he said. "It'll take them at least five minutes to get here, so I'll only be actually fighting for ten minutes. I've got thirty years of experience—I can hold out that long. Once you finish collecting the data, come on out and we'll leave together. I believe in you, and you have to believe in me, too. This time, we're teammates."

Silence.

"Is that all right, Officer Xie?"

It might have been a question, but "yes" was the only real answer.

Zheng Jingfeng patted Xie Qingcheng on the shoulder, switched out his magazine, and walked out gun in hand.

"Captain Zheng!" Xie Qingcheng stopped him at the exit. "...Thank you."

Turning around, Zeng Jingfeng saluted him beneath the sparkling digital starlight. Then he grinned and ran out into the night.

Chapter 213: They Will Save You

ZHENG JINGFENG'S WATCH had been a gift from his son.

In the open air outside the control room, Zheng Jingfeng pressed the timer button on his watch a few times, triggering a clear “fifteen-minute countdown” noise. The tick-tick of passing seconds seemed to grow ever louder, and as his heart thumped louder in turn, time flew by minute by minute.

Holding the night vision scope attached to his gun to his eye, he gazed out at the row of combat robots slowly coming into view. He gulped. “Come on, you bastards,” he muttered under his breath. “Come play with Grandpa.”

Inside the control room, Xie Qingcheng stared at the screen of his Fengbo system, watching the completion tick up. One percent, 1.8 percent, 2 percent, 2.3 percent... The voice of a headquarters technician came through his headset from time to time, instructing him to enter a few codes into the system to help with the calculations.

The percentage displayed still moved at a snail's pace.

As strange a time as it was for nostalgia, Xie Qingcheng couldn't help but think about his childhood computer class. He'd been born in the late 1980s, and the school hadn't set up a computer class until he was in sixth grade. At the time, computers hadn't been something you'd see in every household, so the computer at school was a novelty. Two deskmates would share one machine, and they had to wear disposable, dust-proof shoe covers in the computer room.

Students loved to copy songs or photos from popular TV series to floppy disks, which could only hold ten to thirty megabytes, during computer class free time. But free time was usually short, a mere five or six minutes after the teacher finished class and the students finished their computer homework. That brief window was all they had for both deskmates to search for pictures or download songs; and the slow internet

meant it took a long time to download even one. Often a song would only be half downloaded, with the percentage still showing, when the teacher disconnected the internet, leaving the music ultimately unobtained.

Xie Qingcheng hadn't experienced that kind of anxiety in more than twenty years, but what he felt right now was unmistakably the same, staring at the percentage and hoping it would go faster, faster...

Fifteen percent.

Twenty-five percent.

Suddenly, he heard gunfire outside. He knew that the robots were in range of Zheng Jingfeng, and the battle had begun.

Outside, though he didn't have the Fengbo system, Zheng Jingfeng could still tell that this group of robots were just the ordinary "soldiers" of the island, with low mobility, defense, and intelligence. A slight sense of relief washed over him. If this had been fifty berserkers, he probably wouldn't last fifteen minutes even if he had a hundred lives. But against only "soldiers," his confidence increased. He hoisted his gun and pulled the trigger with a yell, sweeping the gun across the robots rushing toward him.

"Ten minutes!"

After emptying a magazine of bullets, he reloaded with a speed that no ordinary policeman could match, firing at the robots still approaching. Shot after shot found its mark with perfect accuracy: the robots' heads. But while some hit fragile points and damaged the robots' brains, others only hit the alloy casing and bounced off without penetrating.

Just at long range, Zheng Jingfeng sent more than ten robots to the ground, but there were still more than thirty still coming at him. He silently calculated the remaining distance and the number of remaining "soldiers" in his mind. It'd be impossible to take them all down, but if he fought them at close range, he'd definitely be at a disadvantage. What should he do?

It felt like worms were crawling across his forehead. He reached up—they were beads of sweat.

Thirteen hundred feet, twelve hundred feet...

Their robotic faces were already visible, so he knew he couldn't delay it any longer.

He swallowed hard—and suddenly, he had an idea. He remembered seeing the battle analysis of the island’s robot soldiers back at headquarters. As he drank a milk tea, he’d watched the technician log into the Fengbo system: *Attacking the body may cause self-detonation. It is recommended to aim for the head.*

In a flash of inspiration, he knew what he had to do.

Fengbo always suggested that they aim for the robot’s head, as the medium-range explosion that resulted from damage to the body could harm police operatives. But right now...

He had to take a gamble!

Immediately, Zheng Jingfeng readied his machine gun. This time, he didn’t aim for the heads—he fired directly at their chests and abdomens. The bullets struck metal with a volley of sharp clangs. One struck a robot’s waist and penetrated into its body. Its eyes flashed green, and it fell to the ground with a clunk and stopped moving.

Zheng Jingfeng cursed. It was a dud! Frantically he began firing on the abdomen of a second robot.

The second and third robots fell to the ground on the destruction of their central hub, reduced to piles of scrap metal. But the loss of combat power was insignificant. Those thirty-some robots were still approaching quickly, now at a distance where he could shoot them without a scope.

He didn’t have much time left...

“Eight minutes!” the watch yelled.

Zheng Jingfeng cursed again. “I can’t be this unlucky! I lost at cards every time I played during the Spring Festival, and I can’t even draw a good lot now either?!”

He didn’t care anymore. He picked out the most annoying robot from the fast-approaching crowd, concentrating his firepower at its torso. Pungent smoke filled the air around him, and empty magazines fell to his feet one after another.

Boom!

The last bullet of the clip penetrated the belly of an unfortunate robot and exploded. It spun on the spot twice, green eyes flashing. A second later,

it collapsed into yet another pile of scrap.

“Fuck! Are you kidding me?!” Zheng Jingfeng almost wanted to throw his gun to the ground.

But at that very moment, the unfortunate machine started emitting smoke, its electronic eyes flashing from green to red. Zheng Jingfeng sprang into action just in time—he’d finally got it! He made it explode! Retreating to the control room, he crouched down split seconds before a loud *bang* came from outside.

The damaged robot triggered a massive explosion, sending shockwaves through the air. The blast sent the more than thirty robots around it flying across the ground. Exposed cables stuck out from many of them, some were missing arms and legs, and some were lying on their backs like crabs in the deep crater that the explosion had left. Unable to climb out, they kicked their legs weakly.

“Six minutes!”

The cry of the watch echoed across the gunsmoke-hazed battlefield. After a brief pause, Zheng Jingfeng ran out from inside the mountain to see the pile of robots. He couldn’t help laughing.

Shit, he even already thought of how he was going to brag about this to his grandson. And well, it couldn’t really be called bragging. After all, his grandpa was *actually* amazing! He could—

He hadn’t finished the thought when his smile froze.

There was a pack of something rushing toward him on the foggy, dense horizon. It approached like a surging black wave, so much faster than the earlier robots. He could hear a terrifying noise, like the unceasing groans of a beast.

A beam of light suddenly broke through the smoke of the explosion, bearing down on Zheng Jingfeng at the speed of a meteor, like a sharpened arrow falling from the sky. Zheng Jingfeng couldn’t dodge, so he raised his gun and pulled the trigger—there was a bang, and a howl. The thing fell heavily onto the ground in front of him in a cloud of dust.

One of the robot dogs.

The dogs were huge, following on the heels of the first group of robots like a cackle of hungry hyenas in the wilderness. In an instant, hundreds of robot dogs surrounded Zheng Jingfeng, their electronic eyes flashing with a dark green light. Those glowing dots of green circled around him, forming a deeply beautiful yet terrifying fluorescent galaxy.

Zheng Jingfeng gulped. There were too many of them...

And they were different from the previous robots. These were small, fast, and hard to hit. This was going to be a problem.

“Awoooo—”

“Awoooooo—!”

One dog started, and the others joined. These monsters were based off of real animals, and the howls built swiftly upon each other, almost drowning out the weak noise of Zheng Jingfeng’s watch.

“Five minutes!”

Five minutes left! Could he last that long?

Sweat dripped down his face. Zheng Jingfeng’s heartbeat was the only battlefield drum beating for him here. *Thump, thump, thump...*

Five minutes. He had to hold on, even if it was impossible. There was no other way out. He and Xie Qingcheng were here to collect data on the latest weapon, the frost laser, so the second wave team could break through the defense line quickly—so they could storm this island of sin and bring about that final battle that had been brewing for three years straight.

It looked as if he was facing these dogs alone, but he knew Xie Qingcheng was still fighting in the control room behind him, that he had countless comrades thousands of miles away in Huzhou. Even in the castle in the middle of Mandela Island—their frozen teammates were still waiting for them.

He had no other way out.

“Awoooo—”

A long howl, as if an order from their leader to attack. As it went out, Zheng Jingfeng wiped the dust off his face. He stood up, alone, and replaced his magazine with a click.

The robot dogs immediately washed upon him like a tide. He shouted, raised his gun, and fired a dazzling white light at a group at the front—a flash bomb! He had another flash bomb!

It landed in the middle of the pack, hissed and burned for three seconds, then exploded with a *bang*! And with no highly intelligent berserker to stop it, the device could show its true power. On detonation, the small bullet created a rolling wave of air, overturning the group in an instant. Steel fragments flew everywhere alongside dirt and gravel, and the sky was filled with the screaming and wailing of canine machinery. Seeing this, the other dogs stood still, not daring to immediately approach. The flash bomb had successfully delayed their attack.

But Zheng Jingfeng didn't have many of them. One for the berserker and one just now meant that he only had three more left. Once they were used up, he wouldn't have any large-impact weapon left to scare off the dogs.

“Four minutes!”

There were four minutes left!

Four minutes and three bullets. He had to hang in there...

Zheng Jingfeng held up his gun and looked at the dogs hesitating to approach. They were obviously adjusting their combat mode, reluctant to make another reckless rush forward. They were observing his weapons... Was there another lethal projectile in his gun?

After another twelve seconds, the robots seemed to reach a conclusion and decided to take a gamble. With a howl that only they could understand, they rushed toward Zheng Jingfeng again—and he knew, from years of combat experience, that he couldn't hesitate now. If there was any hesitation, the enemy would know he didn't have enough ammunition and would launch an intense attack at once to exhaust his weaponry.

So he immediately opened fire. Even though he only had three left, he fired as if he had three hundred.

Bang bang!

Two right in succession—an explosion on the left and right of the crowd.

Screams and steel melded together again. The robot dogs were scared off, stopping their assault. This time, they wouldn't launch another so quickly. The double shot had made them judge the situation incorrectly—they assumed Zheng Jingfeng had a lot of these bullets, and didn't dare act rashly. They raised their heads to the sky and let out a long, hair-raising howl, but they didn't attack.

They were waiting.

The things imitated real creatures quite accurately. Zheng Jingfeng had lived in the countryside when he was younger, and he could tell immediately that they were waiting for help, for more of their kind to join the fray.

The more enemies there were the worse the situation was, but all Zheng Jingfeng needed was time. Waiting was dangerous for him, but it wasn't the worst option. He would just have to take the gamble to see which would be here faster: Xie Qingcheng, or the dogs' reinforcements. He calmly glanced at his watch.

There were still three minutes left...

Waiting had never felt so torturous, and every second felt like a year. Zheng Jingfeng had only been in this sort of situation twice in his life—right now was one of them, and the other had been...

Xie Ping and Zhou Muying's young faces flashed in his mind.

The other time had been that mission, after they had just graduated, when the three of them went undercover in Myanmar to hide in the cracks of a warehouse for four days, unable to move at all.

Thinking of his deceased comrades, Zheng Jingfeng felt a faint warmth and a rush of emotion. He lowered his gaze, and his heart settled. That feeling helped him stay standing, and he felt like they were here with him now, standing on either side of him.

Two minutes and forty seconds...

Two and a half minutes...

Two minutes and fifteen seconds...

"Two minutes!" the watch yelled, still counting down.

Zheng Jingfeng, a man of flesh and blood, was facing off against hundreds of metal dogs. Beasts could smell fear, even these. But they would never smell fear on him.

Because he was here for revenge. He was here to seek justice that had been overdue for twenty years. He held the hope of the dead and the expectations of the living. There was no space for cowardice.

The dogs hung back, still wary.

One minute left.

Zheng Jingfeng knew dawn was coming. He held his breath, waiting for Xie Qingcheng to emerge from the control room. They would be able to leave soon enough. They wouldn't have to stand around while the data uploaded; they'd be able to escape and move. As long as he held on for another minute... Fifty seconds...

Thirty seconds...

“Awoooo!”

A terrifying howl suddenly carried over the wind, causing Zheng Jingfeng's pupils to constrict.

The robot dogs' reinforcements! They would arrive any moment now. He could already see the rolling dust on the horizon kicked up by the swell of rushing beasts.

Twenty seconds...

Placing his finger on the trigger, Zheng Jingfeng turned his head, looking at the door of the control room with his face tense as a rock.

Ten seconds—

The reinforcements were getting closer and closer, and the beasts around them started stirring. His last flash bomb was still in his gun, and he already decided what he would do—as soon as Xie Qingcheng came out, he would use it immediately to give them an opening to escape. Then they could rid themselves of these robot dogs.

Five seconds—

Four, three, two—

“Xie Qingcheng!” The horde was here! Zheng Jingfeng shouted into the control room, “Let’s go!”

One—!

There was no other choice. The reinforcements arrived, and the dogs surged forward—the bullet shot out, setting off a huge explosion in the midst of the pack.

Bang!

In an instant, dirt and steel were sent spiraling through the dense billowing smoke. From within the dissipating black cloud Zheng Jingfeng whipped his head around to look at the control room, but a glance made his blood run cold.

Xie Qingcheng hadn’t come out yet.

The fifteen minutes were up.

But—

“Not yet! There’s incorrect data!” Down in the control room, the voice of a panicked technician sounded in Xie Qingcheng’s ear. “You need to hold on for three more minutes!”

Xie Qingcheng could hear everything that was happening outside. *Three minutes?! Zheng Jingfeng had already used up his most effective weapon against the robot dogs. How could he hold on for another three minutes?!*

“Can’t you guys go faster?!”

“Three minutes! We’ll definitely be done within three minutes—”

“Fuck you!” cried Xie Qingcheng.

“Don’t move! You can’t leave. You have to stay there so we can finish in three minutes...”

Data was still flying across the screens.

But outside the control room, things were chaos. Though countless robot dogs were already wrecked, even more came running through the smoke at Zheng Jingfeng, howling.

Close combat was his only remaining option. He was unyielding; he threw away the empty rifle and pulled out a pair of pistols, shooting and killing everything around him. Within a minute the muzzles of the guns steamed blazing hot.

Real dogs might have been afraid of humans, but these were machines—they rushed forward with an unceasing howl after only a moment of hesitation. Zheng Jingfeng's two fists were no match for a pack of wild animals; with no support and under attack from all sides, he was soon injured. A bloody scent filled the air, driving the robots into a frenzy.

Eyes bloodshot, he roared, fighting and shooting nonstop. The sound of gunfire joined his shouts to form a tragic symphony.

“Fuck—”

One ferocious dog after another fell beneath his fire. He staggered, covered in blood down to the eye sockets.

Fifty seconds...

One minute...

A chunk of his thigh was torn off. No longer able to steady himself, he still gritted his teeth and held on, the butt of his gun smashing down onto the head of the dog that had bitten him.

He panted—but at that moment, a massive, fierce hound suddenly pounced at his neck from behind. Zheng Jingfeng couldn't dodge, so he turned around, gun at the ready to fight back. But he knew it was over this time. It would be hard for him to block the attack, and he was afraid...this time...

He would...

Bang bang bang!

Shrapnel scattered through the air—gunfire!

Right as the dog was about to land on him, two figures suddenly flashed before Zheng Jingfeng's vision. Lao-Zheng was exhausted, his mind dizzy and his vision blurred. His eyes widened—was he hallucinating?

In that life-or-death moment, he actually saw the two of them among the raging flames...

He saw...

“Xie Ping? Muying?!”

They walked into his field of view...

Was this a hallucination? In his final moments?

Chapter 214: I Came to Your Side, Too

AMID THE ROARING gunfire and the billowing smoke, Zheng Jingfeng fell to the ground, staring up at the two figures in front of him shooting at the waves of robot dogs. One of them was even wearing an officer's combat cap.

Their fighting style, their movements, it was all nearly identical to that of Xie Ping and Zhou Muying—as if in this moment, he was truly witnessing his two old friends. But as he looked closer, he realized it wasn't them.

The two figures defending him from the robot dogs were actually... two “berserker robots”?

Zheng Jingfeng was stunned, gaping in astonishment as the berserkers fought off the pack with an array of advanced devices. As the most powerful robots on the island, they were equipped with many high-tech, lethal weapons. They could easily handle the dogs even with their hands blown off.

The berserker robot wearing the officer's cap actually looked back at him and gestured for a fist bump.

Right then, Zheng Jingfeng's mind felt completely empty. “...Xie Ping?” he murmured, uncertain.

There was no response; it only stared at him for a couple of seconds with those glowing green eyes. A robot dog rushed over, and the berserker immediately identified the danger. Turning around, it opened its chest armor and emitted a burning ray, searing the robot dog in half in the blink of an eye.

Two minutes.

They'd managed to delay things for two more minutes.

Wiping the dust off, Zheng Jingfeng propped himself up and stood up off the ground. He raised his guns and ran to the two berserkers, the three of

them seamlessly falling into formation. Back-to-back with the machines, they each covered a hundred twenty degrees—there were no blind spots when they worked together!

“This is really...fucking unbelievable...” muttered Zheng Jingfeng. He felt like he was dreaming.

But what surrounded him was reality. He really had formed a defense team with two berserker robots, all because he’d received a fist bump from one of them.

That was the formation signal that he, Xie Ping, and Zhou Muying had agreed on, on that mission in Burma more than thirty years ago. The fist indicated their new triangle defense formation. Under normal circumstances, Zheng Jingfeng would never have believed something like this could happen. Nothing but a coincidence. But when he met the robot’s green eyes, something had come over him.

What was even more terrifying was that the robot had gotten the formation right.

Zheng Jingfeng shouted at the two robots behind him through the hail of bullets. “Is it you guys? Is it?!”

The berserkers didn’t reply, only silently attacked and defended. Then a new hand gesture was given, changing from a fist to three fingers: “The three of us will get low and attack upward.”

He could almost hear Xie Ping and Zhou Muying’s voices discussing their secret signals with him.

He dropped into a crouch the moment the berserker withdrew the signal, his two “comrades” behind him lowering themselves in tandem. Dogs from three different directions stood poised to spray fire at them, but they ducked down just in time to avoid the flames; instead the dogs torched each other, burning each other to a crisp.

At last, Zheng Jingfeng began to shed tears.

He didn’t need any response. He knew who these two berserkers were... He’d already confirmed it...

But how could this happen? What exactly were these berserkers?!

Time passed quickly in the chaos, his emotions fluctuating wildly. Zheng Jingfeng felt like he'd only been working together with his old comrades for a few moments before the door of the control room opened. Xie Qingcheng ran out, holding both Fengbo points. He had finally finished collecting all the data. "Uncle Zheng! Let's go!"

"No—"

Before Zheng Jingfeng could finish his sentence, his shoulders were pushed. He turned around, surprised, and saw the two berserkers quietly shaking their heads at him.

The one wearing the police cap saluted him, even with its missing hands.

The one without a hat raised one arm to its face.

Though they didn't have all their fingers and their movements were hard to read, Zheng Jingfeng understood immediately. Zhou Muying had given him this signal so many times before. It was a gesture to be silent.

He hadn't cried in decades, but right now, his vision was completely blurred by tears. He almost cried out loud, but he held it back.

"Uncle Zheng!" Xie Qingcheng shouted to him again, worry and anxiety clear in his voice.

Zhen Jingfeng's lips moved, wanting to say something to the two robots. But as he was distracted, a robot dog broke through the line of fire and rushed forward. The light in its eyes turned from green to red as they prepared to shoot out lethal lasers.

Bang!

His senses returned to him in an instant. He aimed and fired, hitting the assailant in the eye and extinguishing the beam of light. The other laser whizzed past his face at a slant, burning directly into the shoulder of the berserker wearing the police cap.

"Xie Ping—!" He screamed out a warning, but it was already too late.

Xie Qingcheng had sensed that something wasn't right outside even while still in the command room. When he emerged to see the two berserkers actually helping Zheng Jingfeng take down the enemy, this made

him even more confused. But he didn't think too much of it until, to his shock, Zheng Jingfeng blurted out "Xie Ping" at a crucial moment.

His eyes widened. Xie Qingcheng's gaze met the green eyes of the robot with a police cap, his head buzzing.

For whatever reason, he suddenly recalled the action that the robot had made twice earlier—raising its damaged arm to the side of its head. He thought the thing was just stupid because it wasn't being controlled by Zoya anymore, but now he realized why the action felt familiar. Because it was...

"Xiao-Cheng, come here. Come learn how to salute from Dad."

Standing in the door of the house, Xie Ping smiled and bent down, speaking patiently to his child, Xie Qingcheng.

"Is it like this?"

"Yes. What a clever boy."

"Then keep working hard, Officer Xie." Little Xie Qingcheng tried his best to lift his chin and puff out his chest at his young father.

Xie Ping gave him a standard salute in return, very seriously. He smiled, eyes curving. "I will. Thank you, my handsome boy."

"Xie..."

He and his father would have this exchange almost every morning when he was a child. Zhou Muying watched them from the side with a smile.

How could he forget...

How did he not realize?!

Like Zheng Jingfeng, Xie Qingcheng stood there for a moment, unable to digest the facts. It felt as though a massive wave was crashing over him.

"Five percent of data upload complete!" The Fengbo point on Xie Qingcheng's wrist sounded with a clear, cold reminder.

This data that was being transmitted back to Huzhou headquarters concerned the lives of thousands of people. They could still hold out for a

while, but the robot dogs gained in number every minute, and the damage suffered by the berserkers was becoming more and more serious. Once they fell, Xie Qingcheng and Zheng Jingfeng's flesh and blood wouldn't be able to handle such an insane assault.

Zheng Jingfeng refused to leave, unwilling to abandon his old partners. Xie Qingcheng's attachment to his parents was even deeper than Zheng Jingfeng's—he was shocked, and wanted to know the truth. But in the end, he was a man who had been suppressing his emotions for more than twenty years. If he couldn't control his emotions, he would have fallen into the abyss of psychological Ebola and been swallowed by death long ago.

Long-term self-control had turned his personal feelings cruel, and that cruelty extended to himself as well. How much pain did a person have to shoulder, how much strength did he need, to give up his emotions? To make the most logical, correct choice?

He was a human, but he had to live like a machine.

“Ten percent of data upload complete!”

Xie Qingcheng rushed to escape, pulling Zheng Jingfeng with him. The firelight illuminated their profiles, dirty and black from all the smoke, and he saw that Zheng Jingfeng's eyes were full of tears. The man was a weathered soldier in his fifties, but right now, he looked like a teenager.

“I can't go... That's...that's them... It has to be them... Go, Xie Qingcheng... We'll cover you...”

There was no way to tell if the tears in Xie Qingcheng's eyes reflected the ones in Zheng Jingfeng's. In this moment, all his senses seemed to close, turning him to near a living corpse. He couldn't have even a fragment of self. The second he let out any of his own emotions, he would collapse.

“Look carefully, Lao-Zheng,” he said quietly. “That's a robot. My parents are dead—you saw it yourself.” He grabbed his collar. “Let's go, Lao-Zheng. We have to go.”

“No...I can't... You don't know... Xie Qingcheng... You don't know how many times I've dreamed of them escaping from the forest in Burma with me... We all lay in the grass at the end, and no one was missing...” A

tension Zheng Jingfeng had held inside him for decades seemed to let loose. He howled, “No one was missing!”

“Do you want to die with them?!” Xie Qingcheng shouted.

A wave of robot dogs rushed them anew. Before the commanding howl was even over, Xie Qingcheng saw a robot dog running around and behind Zheng Jingfeng from one side. The “Xie Ping” robot had been guarding that area, but it was now so severely damaged that it couldn’t respond to the enemy nearly fast enough.

Xie Qingcheng grabbed Zheng Jingfeng and threw him to the ground. As he did, the dog shot out a laser beam to pierce Xie Qingcheng’s back—

Blood splattered.

Zheng Jingfeng’s face turned pale. “Xiao-Xie!”

There was a groan of pain. Xie Qingcheng’s police uniform was torn, fresh blood gushing out from it. The air filled with the smell of iron and burning flesh.

“Fifteen percent of data upload complete!”

He gritted his teeth. “Go! Lao-Zheng, go! Have you forgotten? You said that I’m your teammate this time!” The captain paused, and Xie Qingcheng snapped, “Me, not my parents! Captain Zheng, let’s go!”

His voice and the sight of his blood finally brought the middle-aged man back to the present. Zheng Jingfeng’s eyes hardened, and he immediately stood up, saying in a trembling voice, “You’re right, you’re right...! Xiao-Xie, let’s go... We’re going!”

He helped up Xie Qingcheng, who told him, “I still have the last flash bomb in my gun. You’re a good shot, so take it and make a path. We can’t be caught until all the data is uploaded.”

“Okay...”

Holding Xie Qingcheng’s gun in his bloody hands, he wiped the blood and tears from his face, raised the barrel, and aimed at the great wave of incoming robot dogs.

Bang!

A shot illuminated the dark night.

The flash bomb was like a sword slicing through the waves. In an instant it opened a charred path of survival in the dense ocean of robot dogs

Now! Xie Qingcheng and Zheng Jingfeng rushed forward, breaking through the bloody path that hadn't yet closed. At the last second, Xie Qingcheng took one fleeting glance back.

The two tall berserkers stood behind them, blocking more robot dogs. They fought through the burning, raging fire, looking like two old friends that would never come back. Feeling like his heart had been stabbed, Xie Qingcheng looked away, eyes reflecting the flames and ashes of the explosion as they rushed into the Black Forest.

"Twenty percent of data upload complete!"

The robot dogs were fast, and no normal human could outrun them. They had to increase their distance from the enemy while the berserkers kept them at bay. The two of them ran wildly through the Black Forest, Xie Qingcheng using Case No. 2's hearing to sense any pursuers.

One minute...two minutes...

Zheng Jingfeng couldn't hear anything from behind them.

Five minutes...six minutes...

A mechanical explosion!

Xie Qingcheng paused. He was the only one who could hear the sound from this distance. The sound of...a berserker exploding and being completely destroyed. It felt like a part of his own heart was destroyed, too.

Dad...Mom...

"What's wrong?" asked Zheng Jingfeng.

"...Nothing. Keep running. We're almost there."

Xie Qingcheng blinked hard, holding back the tears just as they were about to spill. The number displayed on his wrist was increasing, ever closer to completion.

"Seventy percent of data upload complete!"

Ten minutes...eleven minutes...

Boom!

A second explosion.

He knew that the other robot hadn't been able to withstand the attacks of the robot dogs. He could picture it falling amid a sea of metal and fire.

"Those dogs will catch up to us soon," said Xie Qingcheng, gritting his teeth. "Just a little more... We can't stop..."

As if drumming to the beat of a battle, the Fengbo system sounded again.

"Ninety percent of data upload complete!"

Victory was imminent.

Though Xie Qingcheng could hear that the dogs had almost caught up to them, the number on his wrist inched ever closer—91 percent, 92 percent, 93 percent...

"Something's wrong!" His pupils constricted as he shouted at Zheng Jingfeng, "Get down!"

Reacting immediately, Zheng Jingfeng obeyed, just in time to hear a couple of gunshots sweeping past them. Xie Qingcheng's hearing had spared them.

But his hearing wasn't without limit. He had been too focused on listening to the pursuers behind them, and didn't realize that someone else was approaching them from a thousand meters ahead. This new threat didn't come on foot—she sat atop a mechanical flying horse, descending from the night sky like the Valkyries of Norse myth. The sound was almost imperceptible, and in an instant, she was before them: a beautiful Slavic woman with a waterfall of blonde hair, and shockingly blue, icy eyes. She held a gun in her arms, marking her as the one who had just fired on them.

Even with no introduction, Xie Qingcheng and Zheng Jingfeng knew immediately who she was. This was—

Zoya!

"Ninety-seven percent of data upload complete!"

"It won't finish," said Zoya slowly, in Russian. Neither man understood Russian, but they knew what she meant.

Zheng Jingfeng whispered to Xie Qingcheng. “I’ll hold her back. There’s only three percent left, Xiao-Xie. We have to—”

“Xie Qingcheng, Zheng Jingfeng. Your mission ends here.”

A second flying horse suddenly opened its wings like a god of death, blocking out the cool moonlight as it flew to Zoya’s side. At the same time, the Fengbo point on Xie Qingcheng’s wrist flashed twice, issuing a system warning that terrified both of them.

“The system is blocked. Transmission...has been disconnected...!”

Xie Qingcheng looked up to meet the eyes of the man sitting on the second flying horse. Those almond eyes were cold and apathetic, free of any trace of warmth they might have once had.

He Yu wore the dark-colored uniform of the Mandela Syndicate, sitting on the sterile, mechanical warhorse with his military boots on the stirrups. Raising his left hand, clad in a black, fingerless glove, he gestured a command. As he looked down at Xie Qingcheng, kneeling on the ground and covered in blood, the mechanical flying horse opened the weapons box on its chest. The muzzle of a gun slowly turned to aim at Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu stared down at him. “You lost, dear professor.”

Chapter 215: I Won't Pretend Anymore

HE YU HAD LEFT CHINA to return to Mandela Island.

Zoya and He Yu faced off against Zheng Jingfeng and Xie Qingcheng; though it was two versus two, it was a fight that the police had no chance of winning. Especially with world-class hacker He Yu disconnecting the Fengbo system midway through Xie Qingcheng's data upload.

After his initial shock, Zheng Jingfeng didn't choose to surrender. He quickly raised his gun and took aim at Zoya—but her flying horse suddenly reared its head, opening a mechanism on its chest to release a defensive shield and guard her completely.

Bang bang bang!

His bullets didn't leave so much as a mark on the shield's special alloy. In a second, two hidden nozzles on the side of the steed opened, emitting spouts of fire like snakes lunging out from their den. Sparks flew as the flames weaved around each other, rushing toward Zheng Jingfeng,

"Lao-Zheng!" shouted Xie Qingcheng.

Zheng Jingfeng dropped to the ground instantly, narrowly avoiding the attack.

But just as he breathed a sigh of relief, there was a chill at his ankle. He turned to see that several iron chains had slithered around him, completely trapping him in the center of a dragnet.

Xie Qingcheng was in the same situation—the assailant controlling the chains had taken advantage of the noise of Zoya and Zheng Jingfeng exchanging blows to hide the clanking of the metal. Shocked, Zheng Jingfeng shifted his eyes to follow the intricate chains to their source. His gaze landed on He Yu's flying horse.

"He Yu...!" he shouted, anger flashing on his face. "Do you know what you're doing?! These are the people who killed your biological

mother! Why choose them?!”

“My mother isn’t dead,” He Yu replied calmly.

“Wh—!”

“...What do you mean?” asked Xie Qingcheng.

“You experienced it just now too. The reason this place is called Mandela Island is because it’s almost completely disconnected from reality. It is an island of dreams, where technology is fifty, even a hundred years ahead. Once you step onto its shores, normal society becomes as distant as a past life. We develop science and technology without limitations, and we’ve made innovations that the secular world would not tolerate. The living can die, and the dead can live. The berserkers that helped you escape just now had the consciousnesses of Xie Ping and Zhou Muying.”

“...Those weren’t real humans!”

“In this world, is it flesh and blood that makes one human, or is it human thought?” asked He Yu softly.

Zoya turned her head and spoke impatiently to He Yu in Russian. He listened and replied to her simply. What he said seemed to be unsatisfactory. Zoya raised her pale golden eyebrows, and her voice turned stern. He continued to reply to her slowly as her face took on a fierce expression. She was silent for a bit, just staring at He Yu.

“Ты любишь его?” Do you love him?

He Yu’s eyes were dark. “Я его ненавижу.” I hate him.

She stared at him still, but he didn’t blink.

Zheng Jingfeng cleared his throat and quietly asked Xie Qingcheng, “What are they saying?”

“I don’t know.”

But they figured it out soon enough. Zoya finally rolled her eyes at He Yu, raising her eyebrows in anger; if she couldn’t beat him, all she could do was concede. She took the reins and brought her flying horse around in front of Zheng Jingfeng. Before he could react, a new steel chain sprang out from its side, binding him tight as a zongzi. It contracted immediately, and

the six-foot-tall Zheng Jingfeng was tied to the flying horse's ass in a humiliating posture.

Obviously in a bad mood, Zoya said something to He Yu, likely something along the lines of, "We should just leave." With that, the flying horse flapped its wings and took off into the air toward the central castle.

Only He Yu and Xie Qingcheng remained in the Black Forest.

Steering his flying horse, He Yu flew down to Xie Qingcheng, where he was trapped by chains and unable to move. He looked down at his exhausted, pale face, at the police uniform stained with blood. His gaze lingered a while on the badge number on Xie Qingcheng's chest. Xie Qingcheng was quiet for some reason—perhaps because of the two berserkers, or just thanks to He Yu's sudden appearance.

He turned his face away.

"What, you don't want to see me that badly?"

Xie Qingcheng stayed silent.

He Yu lifted Xie Qingcheng's cheek with the silver metal tip of his riding whip, forcing him to look at him.

"Do you hate me?"

There was no reply.

Suddenly, He Yu leaned forward to lift and drag Xie Qingcheng onto the horse's back, sitting him in the front. Then, he lifted his hand and removed the two inactive Fengbo bracelets from Xie Qingcheng's wrist. Xie Qingcheng put up a struggle then, his heart filled with rage. Not at He Yu trying to take away the data that he'd risked his life to collect—it was more complicated than that—but he couldn't speak any of it to He Yu.

"Let me go," he demanded.

"No."

"Let me go!"

"Let me ask you," said He Yu stubbornly. "Doing all this, everything I've done to you for Anthony and the others...do you hate me?"

"I told you to let me go!"

Instead, He Yu only used more force, almost crushing Xie Qingcheng's wrist. "I'm only asking you one question." His eyes were bloodshot. Xie Qingcheng was riddled with injuries, and that numb, indifferent gaze...all of it made He Yu's anger impossible to hide. "Xie Qingcheng. Do you hate me?"

There wasn't any answer he could give, but after a long bout of running, an eternity of tensed nerves, the injury inflicted on him during their escape, the side effects of Case No. 2's ability, and the torture He Yu was putting him through, Xie Qingcheng finally broke down. He coughed fiercely, and a mouthful of blood came up. He was about to faint.

His fragile state finally brought He Yu back to his senses. He pulled him into a hug, and it was only then that he noticed that the wound on his back was still bleeding, and his whole body was frighteningly burned.

"Xie Qingcheng...you—" He Yu lifted his hand, palm covered in blood, and his expression changed. "I'll bring you back to take care of it."

"Haven't you humiliated me enough? You'll take me back...? Who will clean my wounds? Xie Lishen?" Xie Qingcheng spat out the words through gritted teeth. "And you'll stand there and watch him insult me, right? I'm sure you'll find that hilarious." He tried to pull his hand out of He Yu's grasp. "Let me go."

The short-lived energy RN-13 granted him was slowly disappearing, and Xie Qingcheng felt his strength becoming more and more insignificant next to He Yu's. He didn't want to be in such a state; he didn't want to be at the mercy of others. He had his own way of taking care of things, injuries, fever, or otherwise.

He didn't need He Yu...

There was a hidden compartment in Xie Qingcheng's gloves that contained a small injection of highly concentrated RN-13 and blood serum. He'd placed it there for emergencies before he ventured onto the island. It wasn't good medicine—it would consume too much of his vitality, accelerating his organ failure. But at least it could restore his physical strength, heal his wounds, and increase his combat effectiveness.

When necessary, it could even restore his dignity.

In front of him on the horse, Xie Qingcheng raised his arm and swung his elbow back at He Yu's chest. He Yu reacted quickly and dodged, but Xie Qingcheng was waiting for that—though his movement was restricted by the chains, there was more than enough leeway for him to pull the injection out of the gloves' mechanism. He grasped the tube in his palm, opened it with one hand, and twisted the needle out, stabbing toward his own wrist with vehement accuracy.

"Don't use that serum again!" Just as the needle was about to pierce his flesh, He Yu grabbed Xie Qingcheng's hand. He held on tightly, forcing his palm to open, little by little. "Do you want to die?!" He Yu's face was pale.

Xie Qingcheng was hardly his match right now. In an instant, the needle changed hands; it was now in He Yu's palm. He breathed a sigh of relief. But his expression shifted slightly as he suddenly seemed to realize that he'd said something wrong.

Slowly, Xie Qingcheng turned around to look at him. "You know what this is."

Not a question. A statement.

He Yu didn't reply. Xie Qingcheng just stared at him, a complicated expression on his face.

In truth, if He Yu really hadn't wanted to admit to anything, he had a lot of excuses at his disposal. He could have claimed he had information about the Dreambreakers, or that he just made an educated guess. Or he could have ignored Xie Qingcheng and avoided explaining altogether.

But right now, He Yu was like a shadow puppeteer who had been behind the screen for too long. He was tired. He'd been pretending in front of Xie Qingcheng since he returned to China. His performance had caused so much unintended harm, intensifying their pain... Was he really happy like this?

Was this endless, cruel revenge really what he wanted?

He met Xie Qingcheng's eyes, those eyes that seemed so calm yet hid an immense bitterness and sorrow. He held the slightly shivering man in his arms, feeling his abnormally high temperature, the blood on his hands as it

seeped out from Xie Qingcheng's wound. He lifted his gaze, and it fell onto Xie Qingcheng's forehead.

The spot where Xie Lishen had struck him against the corner of the table had healed, but there was still a faint scar. That scar seemed to be engraved onto He Yu's heart, too. He closed his eyes. Suddenly, he didn't want to continue this farce anymore.

He'd had enough.

"Yes." He Yu threw the needle to the ground and had the flying horse crush it, looking into Xie Qingcheng's eyes. "I know."

Xie Qingcheng didn't respond. He only stared at He Yu, knowing that he wasn't finished, and waited.

"...The Dreambreakers usually operate in groups of three, and the same is true for undercover missions."

"So?"

Silence, before finally, He Yu said, "I am the third member of the Dreambreaker team responsible for collecting this data."

No response to this came.

"I've been a Dreambreaker since the start." He Yu finally laid out all his cards. "Your commander has always known."

A short revelation, but shocking. He had said what he had to say. He waited for Xie Qingcheng to be surprised, stunned, doubtful, or even to not believe him at all. But...

But there was none of that. He just stared at him, almost calmly. But in that look, all the irony, self-mockery, sighing, and numbness intensified.

He Yu's heart was moved under his gaze, and he suddenly understood. "Did you...already know?"

The sadness in Xie Qingcheng's eyes became heavier and heavier. Suddenly, he threw back his head and laughed, a wild laugh filled with sad self-mockery. They didn't have to pretend right now.

"Yes..." He looked at He Yu with cold eyes. It was devastating. "I guessed that you were on our side a long time ago. When you reappeared, I...I knew which side you'd chosen. From the moment you showed up, I

always trusted you. I knew you were one of us, He Yu,” said Xie Qingcheng. “I knew you made the right choice—but you really do hate me.”

He Yu was silent.

“You didn’t want to tell me because you wanted to vent your hatred. So I pretended with you, because that’s what I owe you. I wouldn’t expose you until you admitted it yourself,” Xie Qingcheng said hoarsely. “You’ve finally admitted it, He Yu.”

Almond eyes met peach-blossom eyes, both filled with deep, complicated, unfathomable emotions.

“...You asked me if I hate you,” he continued. “I wanted to ask you the same thing. Have you finished venting your anger?” He stared into He Yu’s eyes. In the moonlight, on a white horse with a silver saddle, he was in the palm of the only young man he’d ever loved. “Do you still hate me?”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t know why he asked this—he shouldn’t be holding any hope. But thinking of what the old director had said to him before he left, he almost felt some faint strength in his heart. It beat in his chest like a soft rabbit, driving him to ask this fragile, wounded question.

He had never shown such emotion to anyone else.

He stared at the young man and repeated quietly, “He Yu, do you still hate me?”

Chapter 216: Still Need to Pretend

“H_E YU, do you still hate me?”

His emotions were so complex that He Yu couldn't find an answer.

All kinds of feelings surged through his heart—Xie Qingcheng knew he was a Dreambreaker the whole time! Xie Qingcheng saw through his act long ago, but didn't say a thing. He just played along, pretending... No wonder...no wonder he never broke down no matter how He Yu tormented him. He knew it was all just to fulfill his personal grudge, not to interfere with their mission.

He Yu couldn't explain what he was feeling. He was relieved that Xie Qingcheng trusted him, but that hardly made him happy. He should've been upset that Xie Qingcheng had acted more nobly than he had, but then he said that all he wanted was to fulfill He Yu's wish for revenge...

The love and hate between them was so complicated, tainting even simple joy or anger. He wanted to delete each and every memory of Xie Qingcheng, but he also wanted to engrave his everything onto his own bones and blood. It felt like he'd forgotten how to love him, but he couldn't learn how to hate him. Hadn't he also been torturing himself while he had tortured Xie Qingcheng?

He had to have Xie Qingcheng. He knew that if he couldn't, the void in his heart would never be filled, his resentment never resolved. But...

But Xie Qingcheng wouldn't grant his wish—

That day, after Anthony left, He Yu had retrieved the surveillance footage from his villa, a glimmer of hope in his heart. He'd watched their confrontation eagerly, but after he'd watched the whole thing over and over again, he couldn't find any jealousy or pain on Xie Qingcheng's face. Like Anthony had said, Xie Qingcheng didn't care whom he was with or whom he slept with.

All his death had brought upon Xie Qingcheng was guilt.

Xie Qingcheng didn't love him. He only felt that he owed him, that he'd hurt him... That was why he'd kept the little Charmander, that was why he bore all the insults and torment—because he felt sorry for him! But was this kind of guilt what He Yu wanted?

Now, in this moment, reunited on this island, he stared into Xie Qingcheng's eyes.

Those eyes were waiting for an answer.

Hate, or not?

In the silence stretching across every second, the glow in Xie Qingcheng's eyes slowly dimmed. His head drooped. He already knew He Yu's answer. The rabbit in his chest, once full of hope, fell still, as if shot by a hunter.

"It's okay," he said at last. Right now, he was somewhat glad he had written a letter to He Yu telling him everything. If he tried to speak all of it aloud in front of him now, he might not even finish his words before He Yu's icy silence sapped him of the strength to continue.

Lifting his bloodied face, Xie Qingcheng said, "I know some things have to be done freely. Even if you stop pretending to be part of Mandela in front of me, you're free to continue hating me. There's no need to mix public and private matters. I owe you a life, and I deserve it. I won't hide."

What did "no need to mix public and private matters" mean? What did "you can keep hating me" mean? He Yu's heart felt like a stone sat atop it, and he didn't know how to reply. He was incredibly angry at Xie Qingcheng—he wanted to throw him off the horse and step on him again and again.

But he also wanted to fiercely grab his hair and kiss his lips, regardless of love or hate. He didn't want to listen to Xie Qingcheng saying such self-destructive words, nor did he want to expect Xie Qingcheng to have him in his heart. As long as he could have his body, that was good enough.

The notification system next to He Yu rang.

"Please intercept the Fengbo system and hand it over to Boss Duan," a mechanical female voice ordered coldly. "Boss Duan is waiting for you in

conference room three.”

The software repeated the command three times in a row; he was clearly being rushed.

He Yu took a deep breath, doing his best to calm himself down. He knew he couldn't delay any longer with an urgent order. If Xie Qingcheng wanted to keep public and private matters separate, he would oblige.

“We...we can discuss private matters between us later,” he told Xie Qingcheng. “Right now, you need to cooperate with me and keep pretending. I came back to this island specifically to protect you, and we can only rescue Captain Zheng and the others if we work together. Do you understand?”

Xie Qingcheng understood their priorities, of course. He, Zheng Jingfeng, and He Yu were a team of three. No matter what tension there might be between him and He Yu, they were still colleagues and teammates. He closed his eyes, his silence affirmative, letting He Yu tie his hands behind his back. He still said nothing as He Yu used the two pairs of police handcuffs at his belt to restrain him.

“It's better than having to use Mandela handcuffs when we get there,” said He Yu, sensing the resistance in Xie Qingcheng's expression. “Mandela's handcuffs are electric. If you talk back, they'll shock you. Not something you want to try.”

That made sense. Xie Qingcheng acquiesced wordlessly. At He Yu's order the flying horse took off, flying toward the main castle.

The central fortress of the island was a building in the Roman style, complete with thick walls, overlapping arches, and domes. The structure was large and complex, each building connected by a stone corridor. The stone was only rarely ornamented with carvings; most of the decoration came from the light and shadow that cut evenly through by the arched architecture, giving it a rigorous, stern aura. When one looked down at it from the sky, the entire castle appeared like an ancient totem engraved upon Mandela Island, hiding unpredictable miracles.

A chill permeated the air. He Yu's flying horse landed at the main gate, where rows of guards, both men and women, were stationed. The women wore crimson dresses, bright as fire, while the men wore simple

black military uniforms. All of them were utterly expressionless, as if something had pulled all the emotions from their bodies and placed them there like pawns on a chessboard.

“Boss He,” said the frontmost pair of guards, bowing to He Yu with empty gazes. “Boss Duan is waiting for you in conference room three.”

The two rows of guards behind them repeated the same sentence. “Boss He, Boss Duan is waiting for you in conference room three.” The words echoed faintly, evoking some cryptic ritual.

He Yu was used to it. He pulled the reins and his horse walked through the rough, arched stone gate into the central structure. Hoisting his legs, he dismounted the horse, silently dragging Xie Qingcheng along after him and into the main hall. Like most Roman buildings, the main castle featured a high domed roof with narrow, tall windows. The light from outside was dim and indistinct, creating a sense of sacred fantasy—it was like standing between heaven and earth.

Xie Qingcheng didn’t have time to take closer look. He Yu took him directly to a vintage elevator, which rose directly to the ninth floor: He Yu’s own room.

“I won’t take you to Duan Wen, to avoid complications.” The elevator door opened, and He Yu kept hold of Xie Qingcheng as they walked down a corridor covered with thick wool carpet. They may have just had an argument, but they really would finish taking care of public matters first. Neither would fail at this important junction.

With his lips directly next to Xie Qingcheng’s ear, He Yu whispered, “I’ll lock you in my room, but Duan Wen doesn’t fully trust me yet. There’s a pinhole surveillance camera in there. Don’t look too surprised by anything you see, no matter what it is. Act as well as I do—act like I’ve captured you, so he won’t suspect a thing. Leave everything else to me.”

They reached a bright, lacquered wooden door with patterns carved across it. On it was an exquisite plaque, engraved with He Yu’s name.

“Just treat it like filming a TV show,” he added, still whispering. “Do you remember how we acted together at school? It’s the same feeling—don’t take anything seriously. If you have something sincere to say to me,

cough five times in a row, and I'll try to get closer to you. I've tested it before, and the volume I'm speaking at is inaudible. Did you get all that?"

He looked down to observe Xie Qingcheng's profile. Seeing him nod imperceptibly, He Yu knew that their scene was cued to start. Shoving Xie Qingcheng roughly under the camera, he pushed him against the door and grabbed his hair to pull him closer.

"You have no right to resist, Officer Xie." He Yu raised his voice so that anyone watching the cameras would notice the violence between them. "If you want your Uncle Zheng to live, you better be honest—you better make me happy."

Xie Qingcheng gritted his teeth. His fragile constitution lent his face an abnormal pallor, making him look even more humiliatingly restrained. He turned his eyes to stare at He Yu. "...Don't hurt him."

"Oh? Do you care that much about him?" He Yu sneered, stroking Xie Qingcheng's cheek with his fingertips. His eyes slid across his face like knives. "But whether I hurt him or not depends on your behavior, Officer Xie."

Their eyes met, as they had years ago when Xie Qingcheng had helped He Yu rehearse at Huzhou University. But that had been just a campus play, no need for Xie Qingcheng to get too into it. Now, he had to devote himself, so the people at Mandela would believe their acting.

"Go stay in my room. Think of your Uncle Zheng's life, and be good."

He Yu opened the biometric lock and brought Xie Qingcheng into his room. With a click, the door closed behind them.

At the sight of He Yu's bedroom, Xie Qingcheng's heart shook. He now understood why He Yu had told him to not be too surprised no matter what he saw, because for some reason, the bedroom...was completely identical to the He family's guest room. That was to say, Xie Qingcheng's residence in the He family's villa. Even the books were arranged in exactly the same way...

A large, solid wood desk sat next to the bed, with a chair in front of it. He Yu and Xie Qingcheng had a very real tussle, knowing that a hidden camera was watching them; and perhaps because their hearts both hid a

certain degree darkness that needed to be let out, they used their full strength against each other.

Panting with effort, He Yu finally pressed Xie Qingcheng hard against the desk, pushing him into the chair and handcuffing him to the armrest. He pulled out the treatment restraints he'd used during his convalescence and locked him solidly into position.

Seeing an opportunity, He Yu leaned in closer. To Duan Wen's surveillance, this would look natural, as if He Yu really was merely putting Xie Qingcheng in his place. As he tightly tied him to the chair, he whispered, "Don't worry while you're in here. No one will come into my room except the cleaner. Wait for me to return after I handle things."

It was nearly impossible to see the movement of Xie Qingcheng's lips. "Loosen it a little."

"It won't look convincing if it's looser," He Yu said, his lips almost touching Xie Qingcheng's ear. There were less than five centimeters of distance between them. His warm breath brushed against Xie Qingcheng's ear, his deep voice echoing in Xie Qingcheng's chest. "I'm your opponent right now."

"Not for real."

"As long as you know," said He Yu. "Don't blame me so much. I'm trying to complete the mission, too."

Using enough force that the veins on the back of his neck bulged slightly, he pressed his "prisoner" into the leather office chair. The black treatment belt, one finger wide, snaked over Xie Qingcheng's light blue shirt and sealed it shut like a devil's curse. He Yu secured him tightly—and then the young man in the black Mandela uniform stood up, taking a bit of distance. He looked down at the man in the Dreambreaker police uniform, with his disheveled hair and blood beading at the corner of his mouth.

Their eyes met.

The camera watched from a dark, hidden corner of the room. The show must go on.

He Yu looked down at him and asked coldly, "Xie Qingcheng, did you ever think such a day would come?"

Xie Qingcheng stayed silent.

“Did you ever think it?”

Closing his eyes, Xie Qingcheng ignored him.

A fingerless gloved hand reached out to grab Officer Xie by the chin. He Yu turned his face and forced him to look at him.

It felt all too familiar. For a moment, they both thought about what took place in the medical conference building—back then, He Yu hadn’t known that Xie Qingcheng was aware he was an informant for the police, so he’d humiliated him ruthlessly. But now, knowing that Xie Qingcheng had guessed the truth long before then, he felt differently about the whole thing.

Staring at Xie Qingcheng’s expression closely, He Yu couldn’t help but wonder what had been going on in Xie Qingcheng’s head back then, for him to be able to grit his teeth and endure humiliation without exposing him.

He couldn’t find the answer in those blind eyes.

“Xie Qingcheng...” he murmured.

Thinking of the past made Xie Qingcheng just as uncomfortable, so he tried to turn his face away again. This reaction ignited He Yu’s already-confused heart, pulling up a tide of desire.

“Look at me.” He released Xie Qingcheng’s chin and grabbed his hair instead, forcing him to lift his scratched, bloodstained face to look at him again. But he still tried to turn away. He Yu used more force, jerking his face toward him even more vigorously. “Look at me!” His fingers trembled.

Their eyes met again, for one second, two...

And then—

He Yu felt a near-desperate frustration and sadness in this atmosphere. His heart surged, intertwined with worry. He lowered his head and abruptly, finally, kissed Xie Qingcheng.

“Mn—!”

If what they were doing was acting, then this might be improvisation. Xie Qingcheng was completely caught off guard, his eyes widening slightly.

He wanted to break free, but he could barely move. He Yu was so rough, and their entanglement was full of impulse, passion, desire—even the instinctive possessiveness of a man.

“What are you doing?!” In the chaos, Xie Qingcheng bit down, drawing blood from He Yu’s lips. He panted, chest heaving, eyes staring through He Yu’s scattered black bangs at his sickly face.

Slowly licking the sweet blood from his own lips, He Yu rubbed the corner of Xie Qingcheng’s mouth with his thumb, wiping away the red mark there that looked like a plum blossom in the snow. He touched Xie Qingcheng’s lips with his bloody fingertips. Though he had acted out of impulse, he still remembered that he was supposed to be acting. He slowly stood up, and, after a moment of silence, he calmed down and “Boss He” answered coldly:

“...Why do you think I’m keeping you in my room instead of killing you? If you even have to ask, should I call you a comedian, or just naive?”

“...Haven’t you had enough fun?” Xie Qingcheng panted.

He Yu paused.



Suddenly he realized that Xie Qingcheng might not be able to differentiate between truth and fiction in such a fierce emotional clash. Xie Qingcheng probably felt too much empathy and self-blame not to be fully immersed in his “role” during the chaos... He saw the deep disappointment and pain in Xie Qingcheng’s eyes. He could feel that Xie Qingcheng’s questions were a test of his sincerity, rather than for show.

It made He Yu look away involuntarily. Lowering his gaze, he was silent for a bit before a cruel smile lit his face and he said, “Yeah, you lied to me and almost killed me. Tell me, how could I let you go so easily?”

He stood up, his hands dropping to the sides of Xie Qingcheng’s waist. As they separated, He Yu pulled out the vials of concentrated RN-13 and No. 2 serum from the equipment bags around Xie Qingcheng’s middle.

“He Yu, you—!”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t think He Yu would do that, and panic appeared in his eyes. Those were some of the most effective tools he had for completing his missions as a Dreambreaker—they might damage his body, but they were highly effective. If He Yu didn’t let him use them, or worse, destroyed them, he’d be helpless.

He didn’t want to keep arguing with He Yu. He tried to warn him with his eyes to not act impulsively. But He Yu ignored him.

He Yu wanted to end this play, with its dialogue slowly spiraling out of control. He took away the injections, then said deliberately, “All right. I still have business to attend to, so sit here and wait for me to come back.”

“He Yu!”

“I don’t need to teach you how to be a good pet, right, Xie Qingcheng? If you’re good, you’ll suffer less.” He Yu threw those words out lightly, without meeting Xie Qingcheng’s eyes. He checked the time on his watch, then pushed the door open and walked out, leaving Xie Qingcheng alone in this room that felt like a step back in time.

Chapter 217: Acting Is Hard

OVER TWO HOURS later, He Yu returned.

He took off his fingerless gloves as soon as he entered the room, loosening the collar of his uniform. From his tired, bored expression alone, it was clear that he must have had an unpleasant interaction with Duan Wen. He glanced at Xie Qingcheng to find nothing different about him, and for whatever reason, his gaze slightly dimmed.

Xie Qingcheng found this strange. It was as if He Yu had been expecting something to happen to him. But it was a fleeting feeling, and before he had time to mull over it, He Yu had already walked over and loosened his restraints.

“I brought you medicine.” He dragged Xie Qingcheng into the bathroom and slammed the door.

As Xie Qingcheng was about to say something, He Yu took the opportunity to put him in position to take off his clothes, leaned in, and whispered with a serious expression, “Be careful. There are cameras here, too.”

This left Xie Qingcheng speechless. Duan Wen was a real pervert.

But if there were cameras, the play had to continue. After some cursory struggle, He Yu held Xie Qingcheng down and injected him with something he had brought in with him.

Xie Qingcheng bit down. “What is that...?!”

“It doesn’t have a name. It’s just a normal anesthetic.” The needle pierced through Xie Qingcheng’s veins as He Yu roughly injected the cold liquid into his body.

He Yu’s voice was loud enough for the cameras to pick up. “After this, you won’t have much strength to resist. You’ll only be able to walk, sit down, or lie down as usual. I don’t want to be assassinated while I’m sleeping, that’s all.”

Once the injection was done, He Yu pulled the needle out. The drug took effect quickly, and Xie Qingcheng fell against the cold sink, gasping for breath. Before him was a mirror, rimmed in gold. He could see himself bent over, his uniform disheveled, as He Yu stood behind him in his oppressive black military uniform. He Yu waited until Xie Qingcheng's energy was almost sapped before he tore off the man's bloodied shirt and threw it to the ground.

"Don't move." Though Xie Qingcheng wouldn't have accomplished much trying to struggle, He Yu still held him down. His eyes moved across Xie Qingcheng's scarred back, inch by inch.

There was the wound the robot dogs inflicted on him. It hadn't entirely stopped bleeding, crimson still seeping from the injury. He Yu's gaze was dark. The top commander had told him about Xie Qingcheng using RN-13 and the serum from Case No. 2 for this mission, so he already knew what was happening. But it was another thing to see Xie Qingcheng injecting the serum without any care for his own life, and even more so to see a serious wound on his body.

He felt bad. The anesthetic he'd injected into Xie Qingcheng's body actually had a healing and restorative effect, but he couldn't mention that. Silently, He Yu took some gauze, iodine, and tweezers out from the sink under the cabinet. He disinfected and cleaned Xie Qingcheng's wound with a stern look on his face. His hand stroked along Xie Qingcheng's gently arched back—his movements weren't gentle, but he was careful.

As iodine was dabbed onto his injury, Xie Qingcheng endured the pain. "Boss He," he said through gritted teeth, sweat dripping from his forehead, "you're certainly going to a lot of effort."

"I captured you so you can serve me. If you get sick or have a fever, what's the point of keeping you?"

After he finished treating Xie Qingcheng's injuries, He Yu threw the medical waste into the trash. Lowering himself to hold Xie Qingcheng under his own body, he caressed him, putting on a show of intimacy for the people watching the camera feed. But he used this opportunity to whisper to Xie Qingcheng, "Don't worry, Captain Zheng is fine."

They couldn't be in contact with each other for too long. Once he finished speaking, He Yu grabbed Xie Qingcheng's hair and playfully

kissed his earlobe. He forced him to stand up in front of the mirror, and said teasingly, “Officer Xie, do you need to use the bathroom?”

His eyes landed on Xie Qingcheng’s silver belt buckle.

“Get out!”

He Yu smiled. He couldn’t be angry at a beast without his claws. “I just injected you with a medicine, but the dosage might have been a little high. If you don’t have the strength, I’ll help.”

Xie Qingcheng’s response was even harsher. “Get out.”

“...You’re very hot-tempered, Officer Xie.” He Yu smiled slightly. “Do you really think this is your own home? You’re quite rude.”

One more time, Xie Qingcheng said, “Out.”

When he noticed that the cold in Xie Qingcheng’s gaze wasn’t pretend, He Yu finally left. But he lowered his gaze as he closed the door, his eyes intentionally or unintentionally landing on Xie Qingcheng’s zipper—before the door slammed shut in his face. Xie Qingcheng still had the strength for that, it seemed, despite the sedative.

“If you really can’t bear it, tell me,” He Yu said slowly from outside. “For the sake of our old relationship, I’m very willing to come in and help you—”

A smashing sound came from the bathroom. Xie Qingcheng had hurled something toward the door, shutting He Yu up.

Well, he couldn’t stay too long right now anyway. He’d only come back to administer the anesthetic and treat Xie Qingcheng’s wound. Not long after, he left to conclude his unfinished business with Duan Wen.

Xie Qingcheng remained trapped in He Yu’s room with nowhere else to go.

Knowing that the room was being watched, Xie Qingcheng couldn’t act too calm. He paced back and forth, smashed a couple of decorations, threw some books off of He Yu’s bookshelf, and made several attempts to break out, despite being unable to open the door or window. In the end, he silently pitched a fit. As if he had used up the rest of his energy, he sat in the armchair by the window with his head down, unmoving.

His acting wasn't perfect, but Xie Qingcheng was a cold person, not prone to anger or losing control. To anyone watching, this probably wouldn't seem suspicious. Leaning back in his chair like an actor who had just finished a performance, he slowly recovered his strength and stamina. He could finally calm down and sort out everything that'd happened. He had a lot of questions—like what exactly was going on with the berserker robots, and what exactly He Yu meant when he said “My mother is still alive.”

All he could do was wait for an answer.

He knew he had to wait for He Yu to finish his errands and come back before he'd find a chance to ask about any of it in detail. But somehow—perhaps because he'd gone through so much lately, or because the room was exactly the same as his old one at the He residence—Xie Qingcheng ended up falling into a light and dreaming sleep.

In his dream, he was back in the He residence of many years ago. He stood in front of the desk in the guest room and placed the book on rare diseases of the world, with its newly written dedication, on the corner of the wooden surface. Taking up his suitcase, he walked out of the room and closed the door. A pattern of hydrangeas was engraved into the surface of the door. With one last look at it, he walked down the long corridor, and left that place.

It was the day he left the He family.

The wheels of his suitcase rolled along the ground. He went downstairs and prepared to leave through the front door, but his dream was unlike his past reality—there was eight-year-old He Yu, standing in the grass and looking at him.

“Mister,” the boy called out, slowly walking toward him. “You dropped this.”

He lifted his arm and handed him a piece of white tulle.

Xie Qingcheng paused. He realized that his suitcase was gone, and he was holding the bouquet of hydrangeas that he'd had when they first met.

“Mister,” little He Yu reminded him again. “You dropped this.”

Hesitating, Xie Qingcheng took the piece of tulle. The wind suddenly blew harder, making his eyesight blur. When his vision cleared, He Yu had disappeared. It was no longer tulle in his hand, but a stack of white paper with a line of beautiful words written at the top.

It was the letter from He Yu.

To my comrades in the police force...

Those words he never wanted to see again appeared before him, deep in a dream. It felt like Xie Qingcheng's heart had suddenly been injected with something that dissolved its energy, exhausting even its strength to pump. He was in pain, but couldn't cry. The corners of his eyes hurt as if they were being torn apart.

The ink on the letter morphed into a net to trap him. *I'm only twenty years old; I have someone that I love, and I don't want to die yet—*

I mention these two officers by name because I hope that after I die, you can use this evidence to carefully investigate these past events. They have been denied justice for twenty years—

I know that I walk a treacherous path, and that it is all too easy to make a mistake. I may never clear my name, or I may lose my life at sea. If that happens—

Those words were like a curse, branded deep into Xie Qingcheng's mind. Even after all these years, they still chased him relentlessly, biting at his neck with sharp teeth.

—I don't want the person who treated me best in this world to grieve for me.

A splatter of blood burst out from his heart.

"He Yu!" Xie Qingcheng woke up, panting for breath. His back was drenched in cold sweat, stinging his wounds as it soaked them. The sky outside the window had turned from bright to dark, and the clock on the wall pointed to eleven o'clock. He was too tired—a short nap in the chair had turned into a deep sleep, lasting almost until midnight.

Through his dizziness, he saw a slender, handsome figure leaning against the window. He Yu was back, looking out into the night in a daze,

but when he heard the noise he turned his head, letting the moonlight cast an edge of light onto his face.

“Did you have a nightmare?”

Xie Qingcheng opened his mouth, but he didn’t know what to say. His heart was still pounding in his chest, as if it could free itself and make a break for it. He closed his eyes.

He Yu walked over, lowering his eyes to look down on him. A moment later, he suddenly pulled Xie Qingcheng up from the armchair, hugged him, and shoved him at the window next to the desk. Pressing him against the glass, he began to kiss him passionately. In the room otherwise so quiet you could hear a pin drop, their heavy breathing, the rustling of their clothes, and the two men’s throbbing heartbeats filled the air.

“What did you dream about?” He Yu’s kiss was like a butterfly perched on the side of Xie Qingcheng’s neck; moving delicately, trying to stir up a storm in Xie Qingcheng’s heart. “Why did you call out to me?”

There wasn’t an ounce of strength left in the freshly awoken Xie Qingcheng—and the second he relaxed, the side effects of RN-13 and the Case No. 2 serum would invade him. Case No. 2’s pregnancy symptoms had affected him when he was using the serum, too. Now even standing exhausted him, and all he could do was let He Yu hold him as the hot kisses trailed from his eyebrows, eyes, lips, and neck, to the depths of his cracked, broken heart.

“I didn’t dream of anything... Let go...” Amid the wild kiss, Xie Qingcheng found the voice to answer hoarsely.

A pause. “You really think you’re at a tropical resort?”

Before he could say anything, Xie Qingcheng began feeling nauseous and uncomfortable again.

He was a doctor, so of course he understood the difficulties women suffered during pregnancy. But that was only knowledge, where the serum made him experience it firsthand. He’d always been rather chauvinistic, but now he finally knew how tough those seemingly fragile women’s bodies were.

The heat of He Yu's breath fell alongside kisses across his ears and throat. With an inhale, Xie Qingcheng lifted his beautiful neck. Struggling powerlessly would look like a response to He Yu, so he halted, and said, "What do you want?"

He Yu stopped too, and stared into his eyes.

Xie Qingcheng's eyes seemed to be filled with nothing but ruins. "Do you still want to sleep with me?" he said, numb and empty. His voice held the calm of a worn-out, mistreated rag doll.

Though his own cruelty felt like a blade stabbing into He Yu's heart, he knew the cameras could be checked at any time. "Well, what other use do you have?" he sneered.

"...Anthony can't satisfy you anymore, hm?"

Did he really want this fight? He Yu stiffened rather obviously, and his face sank. He seemed to want to say something, but in the end he just lightly clenched his jaw. Staring at Xie Qingcheng's face unblinkingly, he searched his features for something other than indifference.

But he didn't find it.

He didn't say anything else to Xie Qingcheng. When his lips fell again, they turned from rude to violent. It seemed like an attempt to vent some unspeakable pain in his heart. As he held him, he pressed Xie Qingcheng's back against the cold window. His kiss was no longer a release of love, but the coiling of hate.

The smell of blood grew stronger, and He Yu's eyes grew crimson. In the chaos, he pulled Xie Qingcheng over to the bedside and kissed him fiercely, his movements becoming more bold and more intense.

The two of them fell together, in the end. He Yu pressed Xie Qingcheng down into the soft mattress, then lifted the snow-white blanket and wrapped them both inside, shrouding them in darkness. Xie Qingcheng couldn't tell if He Yu's actions were his own or for Duan Wen to see. All he felt was his heart becoming heavier under them, beating strained as if filled with lead. He could feel the sincerity of these actions. No matter He Yu's purpose, the hatred was not fake.

So Xie Qingcheng held tight to He Yu's wrist, desperately and forcefully, willing to use up the last of his strength even as it was ebbing away from him. He seemed to want to stop him, but it felt like he was begging him as well.

Hidden in that bubble of safety, covered by the blanket, Xie Qingcheng couldn't see He Yu's face at all. It was too dark, and he was already half blind. He Yu's words echoed in his flustered, distracted ears—*what other use did he have now?* Real or fake, in this moment, it didn't seem to matter.

Xie Qingcheng's dream had shaken him badly, and now his body, carrying far too much, was finally torn apart by that sentence.

The overdose of RN-13, the side effects of the serum, the mystery of the berserker robots, Lao-Zheng being taken away... There was so much stress and pressure on him. Xie Qingcheng suddenly wanted to push He Yu away, but at the same time, he held He Yu's hand tightly and refused to let him go. He seemed to be breaking down.

He did break down, in the end.

His body...hurt.

The wound in his heart...hurt.

His body felt like a sponge soaked in pain. The hurt and torture drilled into his flesh. There was no forgiveness for him to receive, but there was no way for him to tell the truth. He had nothing left...nothing left... Dad, Mom, Lao-Qin, Xie Xue... He Yu...

They all left him.

They would never return.

He was losing his mind with pain, panicked with nausea, falling apart like he was about to die. He wanted to scream and howl, but he couldn't make any noise...nothing! A broken sob finally forced from his throat, and he unconsciously grabbed at He Yu's hand and a fistful of blanket.

Black.

Everything was black. His lips opened and closed in the darkness again and again, but he couldn't make a single clear sound.

He Yu hadn't expected him to react like this. He froze, beginning to repeat his name in a panicked voice, pressing closer and closer. Straining to listen, he finally heard Xie Qingcheng's hoarse, barely audible words—he was mumbling, "He Yu...I can't see your face clearly..." His voice was choked with sobs.

"I can't see your face clearly...!"

He Yu's heart shuddered. Only now did he realize how bad Xie Qingcheng's condition was. Xie Qingcheng could no longer bear the pain to act through it—he was a character in the narrative, not a mere performer. He could feel real pain. At first He Yu didn't want to stop the show, but when he saw how crazed Xie Qingcheng was becoming, he realized—

He was, after all, a psychological Ebola patient.

He'd been a patient for over twenty years; he'd experienced so much more pain and torture than this. He relied on his immense willpower to suppress the disease, to keep from relapsing, but right now... Right now, he couldn't bear it anymore. He Yu had thought this was just a single straw, but for Xie Qingcheng, that last straw triggered an avalanche of shock through his heart.

"Xie Qingcheng..." He Yu finally came back to his senses and clasped Xie Qingcheng's slightly trembling fingers. He couldn't pretend anymore; he tightly hugged him with his other arm. Under the cover of the goose down blanket, they embraced each other tightly.

He whispered into Xie Qingcheng's ear, again and again, "Xie Qingcheng, it's okay, it's okay! I did it for Duan Wen to see... I did it for Duan Wen to see... I didn't want to humiliate you... Xie Qingcheng, can you hear me? Xie Qingcheng...can you hear me?" He Yu hugged him close. He didn't even notice his own voice was trembling. "Don't be afraid. Don't be scared. Can you hear me?"

Xie Qingcheng, held down and embraced by He Yu, felt like the little Charmander from his memories had returned. The little Charmander that, years ago, had smiled at him and said "I can warm your bed for you" now swam to his side from a dream. But he knew that little Charmander had been smashed to pieces, and couldn't be put back together again...

He could never be put together again!

Xie Qingcheng's gaze remained unfocused, his body slightly trembling. He Yu kept stroking and comforting him. It was dark under the blanket, but he couldn't throw it off to turn on the lights instead. All they could do was hug each other right where they were, safe in the darkness.

At long last, Xie Qingcheng slowly stopped shaking. He Yu touched his face—the wetness on his cheek made He Yu's hand tremble.

“I can't see you anymore...” Xie Qingcheng whispered. His voice was so hollow it frightened He Yu. “He Yu...I can't see you...”

I haven't seen you since the night of the naval battle. You hate me, don't you? I'm heartless, I know. So I don't dare say that I miss you a lot... I've remembered more than once the time you walked up to me, holding a piece of white tulle and saying I dropped something. Once something's lost, it never comes back. The you from back then will never come back...

His lips moved silently, trembling.

Sadness welled up in He Yu as he watched, so he hugged him again. The sheet beneath them was damp with sweat. He stroked Xie Qingcheng's hair and called his name over and over. “Xie Qingcheng...don't be afraid... We're acting, we're acting... I won't really hurt you...”

His voice shook slightly along with the rest of him. The resentment on the surface was washed away, forcing the truth from the deepest part of his heart. “It's okay, it's okay. I'm here now, so you don't have to suffer from those drugs, and you don't have to be in danger anymore. You're safe with me. Be good...”

He softly kissed his sweaty forehead. “Those things I said were fake... I'm here and I'll protect you... Ge, don't be afraid...”

Chapter 218: Believing Is Harder

B*RRING—*

Through the aftermath of pain, a sound vaguely echoed. Was it the ringing of a cell phone? An alarm clock? Or—

Xie Qingcheng woke up.

It sounded like a school bell. But why would there be one here? Xie Qingcheng opened his eyes and lay in bed, panting. His surroundings looked so similar to his bedroom in the He family's house, over a decade ago. For a moment, he thought he'd returned to the past, that everything that happened was just a dream. If not for the vague memory of what happened earlier, if He Yu hadn't been by his side—

His pupils constricted.

He Yu wasn't by his side. He was alone in the bed.

Brring—

The noise from outside the window continued. It was a very flat ringing sound, like the sound you might hear coming from a radio station loudspeaker. The feeling of being in a dream intensified, and Xie Qingcheng truly felt like he was lying in the He family's villa again. The ups and downs of the past decade were just a fantasy.

Getting out of bed, he decided to go to the bathroom and find a mirror. His heart pounded. Was it really a dream? Was it all fake? Could it be... He stopped in his tracks as he passed by the window. Xie Qingcheng looked outside, his face pale.

He wasn't dreaming.

Or maybe he just hadn't woken up yet. Edging closer to the glass, he grasped the frame as he took in the outside world. It wasn't the Mandela Island he'd seen when he landed, but it wasn't the spacious lawn of the He estate either. What he saw was...a space that looked exactly like Neverland at Huzhou University!

Neverland was a semi-abandoned man-made island that had been created a long time ago. Nobody knew when exactly it had been built. The school had ended up using it as a place to throw things out, and often assigned it to the outdoor sports club for club activities. During the school's garden party, Xie Qingcheng had helped Xie Xue by putting on a nine-tailed fox costume, and was trapped on the island with He Yu...

There was no mistake—though the island outside was ten times larger than Neverland, it was clear from the topography and the buildings that this genuinely was Huzhou University's Neverland. Chills crawled up Xie Qingcheng's back like a snake. What was going on? Was he dreaming or awake? Was he at Mandela or somewhere else?

Xie Qingcheng tried to calm himself down and slow his breathing. He looked outside again, but his heart was still pounding. It was too eerie...

Once he'd calmed down, he gradually figured out that this was in fact Mandela Island. But after only a short nap, it was now entirely different from what he'd seen before. The Black Forest and blood river had disappeared. All those surreal, futuristic scenes had vanished overnight, replaced by something like hell on Earth.

The group of dogs bounding wildly across the grounds weren't robot dogs, but real wolves, all wearing control chip rings on their heads. The broken robot warriors were no longer scrap metal, but bloody remains. He was too far to see their faces, but he was sure they were all once living people, not robots. The flying horses circling above had disappeared, too, replaced by scattered drones and small, strange helicopters.

And that blood river...

The bloody river was packed with corpses, some of which had degraded to nothing but bone. It wasn't some mysterious chemical river at all, but a sinful place for dumping bodies. The environment before him now was made up of a genuine criminal base, a large, illegal military complex, a slaughterhouse, a laboratory, and a mass grave.

Taking in his surroundings further, Xie Qingcheng was surprised to find that even the castle he was in didn't look the same as before. It was, in fact, a heavily reinforced concrete building, simple in structure but strong in defense. It looked like a fortress, a prison, even a heavily guarded asylum. As he stood there in shock, the voice of a young man sounded behind him.

“Y-you’re awake?”

His head whipped around.

It was He Yu, just come back from the bathroom. He’d been covered in sweat after he lulled Xie Qingcheng to sleep, so he’d gone to take a shower. Seeing the shock on Xie Qingcheng face, he knew what had happened immediately, and walked over to look out the window. He Yu couldn’t show too much emotion while they were still under surveillance, so he just tousled his wet hair as he stared outside with Xie Qingcheng.

“You...can see all of it, right?” They were standing close enough together that their low voices wouldn’t be picked up by the camera. “Does it feel like a hallucination? The first time I saw it, I thought I was crazy.”

“This is...”

“This is the real Mandela Island,” said He Yu, looking at the drone hovering outside. “Its original appearance.”

“What’s going on?” Xie Qingcheng’s face was pale.

Glancing at his fragile state, He Yu gave it some thought, and said, “Let’s talk about it on the bed. It’s cold here, and it’s not a short story.”

Xie Qingcheng was quiet.

He Yu pulled at him gently, not making a sound. “Let’s go.”

Once they were lying in bed, He Yu didn’t start talking about the island right away—Xie Qingcheng’s sudden breakdown had scared him, and he couldn’t help but worry. After covering him with the blanket there was no need to pretend to be distant, and so he quietly held Xie Qingcheng in his arms. He could feel Xie Qingcheng shaking—not just because of what he’d seen, but from the painful aftershocks of his breakdown. It wasn’t easy to calm down after a psychological Ebola attack.

“The island...”

“I’ll tell you everything about the island later. Calm down first,” said He Yu. “You completely lost control earlier. You’re not made of iron, okay? You injected too much RN-13 and blood serum, and you weren’t able to bear it... Does it still hurt? Where does it hurt?”

He was right. It was still exhausting for Xie Qingcheng to even speak, so he was clearly under far too much mental pressure. Why bother resisting? Xie Qingcheng tried to calm his pounding heart, but his breathing still came out quick and humid.

“Earlier...I didn’t say anything strange...?” Xie Qingcheng asked. “In the throes of the attack, it was like I had a nightmare... I couldn’t see anything clearly, or remember anything clearly...”

He Yu hugged him tighter. “No. You were just in pain, and shaking the whole time.”

Xie Qingcheng wasn’t much better now, actually. He might have overcome the pain of psychological Ebola, but now the false reaction to the Case No. 2 serum surged up again. He couldn’t help but feel stricken with fever and nausea in He Yu’s arms. He couldn’t tell He Yu about the pregnancy symptoms from using the serum—it was ridiculous, and it was only a pseudoreaction. So he tried to pull himself together, regained some strength, and gently pushed He Yu away.

“I’m fine now...”

“You’re still sweating. How can you be okay after an episode like that? You...”

When He Yu touched Xie Qingcheng’s feverish skin again, this time it felt much worse. Some women would become sensitive during pregnancy, and the serum was clearly emulating this. Xie Qingcheng was so exhausted that he had no energy to defend himself...but when He Yu touched him, his body trembled.

He immediately pushed him away and almost shrank back to the edge of the bed. “I don’t want to lie here.”

It was a strange sentence. He Yu, in his confusion, didn’t understand the embarrassment hidden behind the words. “There’s only one bed here,” he said, “so you don’t have anywhere else to go. I’m here with you. It’ll be okay as long as you don’t lift the blanket. Duan Wen won’t see you.”

This time, Xie Qingcheng stayed silent. He couldn’t recall his breakdown clearly, his mind blocking out the shattered memories. But he could still remember some of the parts where He Yu had comforted him, for all that they didn’t flow together and were filled with broken words. He

remembered He Yu hugging him tightly the entire time, and those memories warmed his heart a little.

He could tell that the words he spoke now were sincere, and that He Yu's worry at the time had been sincere too.

Xie Qingcheng lay on the bed, taking a long time to gather himself. The psychological Ebola attack had left his entire body sticky with sweat, but He Yu still embraced him without letting him go. He finally gave up on struggling and calmed down in his arms. He really did need to recover—because this was the first time in over twenty years...

That he'd relapsed.

He'd thought this would never happen to him again, that nobody in his life could make him lose control of his emotions like that. But... Lying unconscious in He Yu's arms for a long time, he allowed himself to recover from that first attack in over twenty years, regaining his reason, consciousness, and...strength.

"How is it? Do you feel better?" He Yu's voice whispered into his ear.

At last he came back to his proper senses. Xie Qingcheng nodded, hesitated, and let go of He Yu's hand, which he'd been holding onto. But He Yu quickly grabbed his hand again. Their sweaty fingers intertwined, palms damp.

"Don't let go. You need some comfort. I was like this before, too."

Xie Qingcheng took a deep breath. In the safe space beneath the goose down blanket, he whispered, hesitatingly, "I'm okay. I'm much better now." A pause, and then, "Can we talk about Mandela Island now?"

Now that he'd recovered, his plan was to rein everything back in from this uncontrollable situation. He shouldn't have been so emotional; he shouldn't have let himself be ill. There were still so many Dreambreakers trapped on the island. Zheng Jingfeng, Chen Man, more than two thousand soldiers and policemen... They were all waiting to be rescued. How could he suffer a setback at a time like this?

Gathering himself, Xie Qingcheng asked hoarsely, "What's happening on this island? Those robot soldiers, robot dogs, flying horses..."

I know I came into contact with them. I fought them. Did they not exist?"

He Yu was still worried about Xie Qingcheng's episode, but he knew he had to clear things up with him today. Otherwise, he would only become more uneasy. "That's...a bit difficult to explain," he replied. After a bit of thought, he found a place to start from. "Do you...remember the Mandela effect I experienced as a child? When I thought Xie Xue was my best friend."

"I do."

"Xie Xue partially existed. She, as a person, existed, but part of her was imaginary, formed from my thoughts. Mandela Island is the same. It's just that..." He paused. "Mine was a psychological projection, but Mandela Island is artificially created through carefully studied psychological projections. It's where the real world and the virtual world blend together. You haven't played a VR game before, right? Mandela is very similar to VR."

"No," said Xie Qingcheng, frowning. After a moment, he added, "But I know about the metaverse. Is it the same concept?"

"Yes," He Yu said, breathing a sigh of relief. He was surprised that Xie Qingcheng had grasped it more clearly than he'd managed to explain himself. "The things you were fighting weren't robot dogs or soldiers, but genetically modified hyenas and humans. Did you see the control rings they were wearing? That's what Zoya uses to control them."

"Then my parents—"

"First, calm down," He Yu comforted him. "Everyone here was captured, tricked, and rearranged. Their brains were destroyed, and the control rings on their heads are the only things that allow them to think—they give them some of the consciousness and abilities of others. Those were not your parents."

He continued, "You also should know the metaverse refers to a virtual projection based on reality. In those terms, the Mandela Syndicate started much earlier and went much further than normal society has. Society's understanding of the metaverse is still superficial, and the popularity of the concept has exploded in the past couple of years. But the Mandela Research Organization's research on the metaverse..." He paused.

“Their system was already formed forty to fifty years ago, before even the Internet.”

“Forty or fifty years ago? How old was Duan Wen then?”

“It wasn’t him. Duan Wen is the second-in-command of the Mandela Syndicate. The real top commander is a boy who rarely shows himself.”

Xie Qingcheng’s frown deepened. “A boy...?”

“Well, he’s not really a boy,” said He Yu. “But we’ll talk about him later. Let me tell you about the metaverse ecology the organization has created. Mandela is fascinated by research on the human brain, and they’re far ahead of wider society in this regard. You’re a doctor, so you know that human bodies will produce things like false visual stimuli and false memories under certain circumstances. There’s an interference station on Mandela Island that will induce the Mandela effect in the human brain through the island’s scents, magnetic field, light, sound, and more—that is, create a collective cognitive and memory bias. Can you hear the ringing right now?”

“Yes.”

“That’s one of the interferences. When you’re affected by it, you can’t hear its sound waves because it confuses your hearing. No matter how strong that sense is, it becomes useless as the technology acts directly on the human brain. Through noise stimulation, it alters your logic to make you believe this is a surreal island.”

“So as long as you get close to the island, your brain will be interfered with, and you’ll hallucinate?”

“Pretty much,” He Yu said, “but it can’t be called a hallucination. It’s just that reality and what you perceive are different. There *are* high-tech weapons and ammunition, hyenas, blood rivers, and fortresses on this island...so the satellite imaging is roughly the same as what you see with your own eyes, but everything down here is exaggerated. It’s like the patterns on certain butterflies; it evokes a fear response in enemies.”

He paused. “When outsiders come to the island, it’s like they’ve suddenly arrived in a world that’s detached from reality. It makes them terrified of the enemy’s strength, makes them doubt themselves over what’s even real, and before long, they panic.”

Xie Qingcheng mulled over He Yu's words. "But the Fengbo system also collected data about those very believable weapons..."

"No. There aren't that many real advanced weapons on the island," He Yu said. "The frost laser that froze the Dreambreakers is one of them, and they only finished making it in the last couple months. Even I didn't know about it. And what the Fengbo system collects is the data of heavily modified humans. What Mandela is best at is bioengineering—they seek out superior genes and carry out extreme transformations, turning human beings into monsters trapped between life and death."

"The opponents we ran into were powerful. Can they really push the human body to that limit?"

He Yu made an affirmative noise, his expression darkening. "After all, twenty years ago, they were able to perform a full-body, face-changing cosmetic surgery on Wei Rong. In the past couple of years, they've developed things like obedience potion and spiritual Ebola. Their ability to transform and modify organisms is terrifying. Zoya has installed explosive systems and other weapons onto the modified people, too, so the effects are even more realistic. They have experts who design weapons to be more compatible with the effects of virtual projection. In the end, people's vision, hearing, and smell are all deceived."

As he listened, Xie Qingcheng suddenly realized a problem. "All this... Have you told the top commander? The Dreambreakers have always believed these are futuristic weapons that Zoya and the others have invented."

There was a long beat of silence, as He Yu stared into Xie Qingcheng's eyes in the darkness. He didn't answer directly, instead asking, "Xie Qingcheng, do you know that among everyone on the island, you and I are the only ones who can see the island in its true form, without illusions?"

Xie Qingcheng's eyes grew wide.

"Lao-Zheng, the soldiers who arrived before you, anyone else—what they see is always a fantasy island. They can't see the truth. The truth is that the island isn't truly that frightening, nor especially futuristic yet—it's just a criminal base under a cloak of virtual reality. To put it simply, it's like an upgraded version of Disney's 5D amusement park. It still relies on people, medicine, and animals to protect it. But to a normal person, all of that is

robots and future technology. They were all tricked by Mandela, and they all believe it. You and I are the only exceptions.”

Almond eyes met peach blossom ones.

“Have you guessed why we’re the only exceptions?”

Thinking it through, recalling what He Yu had said about the hallucination principle on Mandela Island, he was suddenly struck with a thought. “Is it because of psychological Ebola?”

The smile that appeared on He Yu’s face held no small dose of bitterness. “Yes. The hallucination interference on Mandela Island is designed for normal brains. Since the two of us are ‘extremely abnormal,’ we’ve managed to escape the brainwashing to see things more clearly than anyone else. I was never affected, right from when I arrived on the island. For you, you’ve been controlling your illness so well for such a long time that you seem no different from normal people. So you were deceived at first,” said He Yu. “But after your attack just now, you’ve staggered out of the hallucination. That’s why you can see the real Mandela Island now that you’ve woken up.”

He Yu’s voice was quiet. “To get back to the question you asked me earlier... You asked me if I’ve told the top commander all this.” He lowered his gaze. “I did. I did, many times. They confirmed it themselves several times, even, but the people they sent out couldn’t see it. And Duan Wen and the others have been promoting the idea that they have future technology—just like Qin Ciyan fabricating that the First Emperor was a set of data, they wove lies and illusions. I saw the truth, but nobody believed me.”

Silence was Xie Qingcheng’s only response.

“I tried very hard to convince everyone. I attempted to record it, but the virtual reality technology here can fool even cameras, so it failed. In the end I couldn’t defend myself, and the Dreambreakers’ suspicion of me deepened...so I never mentioned it again.

“Cognition is determined by what people see, hear, and experience. When I’m the only one who can see the truth, the truth becomes fiction. The only three people who know my true identity are the top commander, the deputy commander, and the foremost officer in charge of the entirety of Dreambreaker. I’ve told all three of them the truth about Mandela Island.

The top commander was all right—he at least tried to investigate—but the deputy commander thought I was crazy, and the officer in charge of the Dreambreakers even suspected I was a double agent.

“If they’d been willing to believe me, Duan Wen and his team wouldn’t have had time to invent a weapon like the frost laser. I’ve been telling them to attack as early as possible for the last three years. I’ve told them not to be afraid of the pattern flashing on the butterfly’s wings. But they didn’t listen. Because their initial attacks failed, they’ve gotten more and more convinced that Duan Wen and his men are far more powerful than they actually are, and that’s given Mandela time to develop a truly destructive defense weapon.

“I was nearly killed by the police in the naval battle, so the Dreambreakers suspected me of holding a grudge against the police—they’ve never fully trusted me. There’s a lot of information they would never share with me. They would rather believe that a mechanical flying horse exists than believe that it’s a semi-virtual projection of a modified helicopter. Since they saw the flying horse with their own eyes, they won’t believe they’re wrong even if the helicopter is the truth.” He Yu spoke calmly. But beneath that calm lay a suffering and pain he’d been struggling with for three whole years.

“What’s more, I’m mentally ill, and the truth I see is questioned over and over again. In the end I had to follow the majority and think about the problem from their perspective. I’ve had to explain the situation in a roundabout way to achieve my goal. It’s hard for them to trust someone like me, anyway; if I tell them a shocking truth, then my words will be taken as false. Because I’m ill, because I was injured accidentally, no matter how much I cooperate with them, no matter what I give them... I even gave them samples of my blood for research... But changing one person’s prejudice is harder than shaking a mountain. Changing the prejudice of a group is as impossible as returning spilled water seamlessly to its glass.”

There was a long pause. “Xie Qingcheng,” he said at last, “I’m very happy you can see the same thing I can. It makes me less lonely.”

Xie Qingcheng could understand He Yu’s helplessness. Someone who didn’t have a proper place on either side, who was a mental patient—would he ever be regarded as a comrade, no matter how much he

contributed to the Dreambreakers? He would always be a black sheep. People would rather believe that an iron horse could fly—the reality that they and other “normal people” could see—than believe the words out of his mouth: “Don’t worry, it’s just a modified helicopter.”

Though Xie Qingcheng knew he had no right to, he couldn’t help but ask, “Have...have you been living like this for the past three years?”

He Yu lowered his gaze. Maybe it was because nobody had truly believed him in three years, or because everyone was trying to guard against him, but not a single person had asked him if he was having a difficult time. He Yu’s eyes slowly turned red.

“I’ve never lied,” he said hoarsely, letting out a breath he’d been holding in for so long, “but nobody believed me. They could believe in things that were so far removed from reality, but they didn’t believe me... I really hate Mandela. They killed my mother, they made me suffer for twenty years... I don’t know why the police still don’t believe me. Is it because they nearly killed me? Because I’m sick? Am I not allowed to want justice and truth because they hurt me and I’m sick...?! They say they believe me, but they doubt the information I provide. But...is that my fault?! Xie Qingcheng. Is that my fault...? Why...why would they believe in illusions over believing me... Why will no one believe me, no matter how hard I try...”

The more Xie Qingcheng listened, the more sadness he felt. Despite all the unresolved issues between them, he still worried for He Yu. It made him worried when he saw him so sad that his voice choked, just as He Yu would drop everything to hug him when he saw him break down. That had never changed.

So that was how it was... The Dreambreakers didn’t completely trust He Yu. They thought he might betray them because he was a mental patient. Unable to give them much information, all He Yu could do was wait alone in the enemy camp, hoping for someone who would trust him. And if that person never arrived, he would accept his fate and continue to think of ways to cooperate with Dreambreaker while suffering their ridicule.

A mentally ill twenty-something was the only one who knew the truth. He had to take into account a normal person’s understanding and go along with it whenever they said that black was white. He was finally doing

the right thing, and still had to endure others laughing at him, doubting him, looking down on him, mocking him...

In the silence, He Yu started as he felt a movement at his fingers. He realized that Xie Qingcheng was now holding his hand.

"I know you might not want to believe me for a second time, but He Yu, I really didn't think that you would go to Duan Wen's side of your own accord. I just... I wondered if you were brainwashed, if your thoughts were being controlled... Even as you were committing the most egregious deeds, I held onto that conviction. I know you hate me, but I know you're not someone to lose yourself over a personal grudge. So I'm saying that I know which side you've been on since the beginning. Though I've tested you and hesitated, I truly... I never doubted that there were lines you wouldn't cross."

It was the truth. Before the weeks he'd spent at He Yu's residence, he had always been wary of He Yu's identity, testing him and trusting him both. He didn't believe that He Yu would really join the organization that had killed Vivian, but he couldn't be sure. He Yu's performance had been realistic enough to genuinely worry Xie Qingcheng, even making him suspect that He Yu had been brainwashed by Duan Wen. He knew that He Yu wouldn't fall to Mandela's level, but he couldn't find any evidence to make his heart feel at ease.

It wasn't until he was trapped in He Yu's house that he'd had the chance to gather intel. And after he got out, he'd finally had the opportunity to confirm his suspicions.

Right as he was handing the information to the commander, who was waiting for that last bit of data to fill in the blanks of the map, he'd asked whether or not He Yu was an undercover agent. Having guessed as much, Xie Qingcheng was insistent on knowing the truth. The commander had no need to hide anything anymore. He took a deep breath and said, "Yes."

As soon as he heard that answer, Xie Qingcheng had felt his heart settle down. He didn't know what he was feeling in that moment; he finally knew that He Yu was the informant, that his guess had been correct... But at the same time, this confirmed that He Yu hated him. Hatred not because of where they stood, but because of their personal grudges. He Yu still hated him for lying...

“Do you have something in mind, to ask that?” the commander had asked.

Xie Qingcheng was silent for a long time. With feelings mixed, he finally said, “I will protect him.” He slid the hard drive across the desk. “Please confirm that I can. I took this from his home; he didn’t provide it. The information in this drive is vital to our mission. If there are any spies from Mandela in our organization, he’ll be in danger. We’d be pushing him into the fire—he can’t die for us a second time. I won’t watch him sacrifice himself again... Please promise me that I can protect him. That is my only request.”

Beneath the covers on Mandela Island, Xie Qingcheng looked into He Yu’s eyes. “I do believe you,” he said. “Because I believe in you, I waited for that confirmation. I know you hate me, but you know that I’m different from the others. No matter how much you hate me, I know that hate is only directed at me—I know you’re not evil. You don’t want to harm everyone. So are you willing to believe that even if I can’t see Mandela’s real appearance, I would believe you as long as you told me?”

Maybe it was just his still-fragile state after a flare-up, but Xie Qingcheng found he was choking up a little. “If I tell you...that I won’t treat you as a patient, as a betrayer...will you believe me...one last time?”

He Yu gazed at him for a long time, and when he opened his mouth it finally revealed the instability, the injustice that he’d been feeling. “Xie Qingcheng...Xie Qingcheng...” The last snowflake fell, and the snowy mountains finally shook free. After witnessing Xie Qingcheng’s biggest breakdown, something he’d never seen before, and hearing these words from Xie Qingcheng’s mouth, he just couldn’t bear it anymore. He finally, truly cried as he used to do. His sobs were filled with such sadness; with such helplessness, persecution, and pain.

“I...I treated you like that...back then... I hated you for abandoning me...and wanted to take revenge on you, but I...I...” He couldn’t continue. He hugged Xie Qingcheng tightly again. “I’m sorry...I’m sorry! I don’t want to see you in a flare-up again, never again! Let’s not fight anymore, okay? I don’t want to talk about the past anymore... I don’t want to keep fighting... Never again... Xie Qingcheng,” he sobbed, “it’s all over now...”

I don't hate you anymore... I don't hate you, so don't be sad, okay? Don't be sad anymore..."

Xie Qingcheng's heart shuddered. He hadn't believed he'd ever hear the words "I don't hate you" from He Yu. Still holding his hand in the dark, He Yu led his palm upward and rested it on his own cheek.

"Xie Qingcheng...can you see me now...?" he asked softly, choking on his tears. "Can you see my face?"

It was like passing through the illusion of Mandela Island and into the truth. *Can you see my face?* Xie Qingcheng's fingers hesitated a moment, then stroked He Yu's cheek. "...I can see it."

He Yu's tears rolled down between his fingers.

Fingers trembling, voice hoarse, Xie Qingcheng said, "I can see your face."

For three long years, he had never seen this face not filled with hatred. But now he finally saw it once more. In the hard-earned warmth of He Yu's expression, their hearts were filled with pain and worry. Neither of them mentioned the scars they bore, for fear of opening those old wounds again.

"Don't cry," said Xie Qingcheng. "Don't cry. I'll do as you say. I won't mention it... We won't fight anymore. Don't cry, He Yu. We won't fight anymore. Don't cry..."

Chapter 219: In the World of Mandela

IT TOOK THE TWO of them a long time to recover their equilibrium.

After countless bloody clashes, they finally understood each other's pain, had witnessed each other's weaknesses. They could no longer bear to hurt each other again. Both of them were afraid to bring up past harms, afraid that a single misstep would shatter the tenuous peace between them. They didn't speak of Chen Man, or Anthony, or the countless misunderstandings between them; they simply left those thorns embedded in their flesh.

But what would end up happening between them—separation or reunion, resentment or infatuation, conflict or peace—ultimately depended on these two men and no one else. Other people, other things, could present mental obstacles, cause misunderstandings, create friction... But in the way that a planet which strayed from its orbit would return to its proper track, Xie Qingcheng's despair would always make He Yu drop his mask, and He Yu's pleas would always make Xie Qingcheng close the distance between them.

Even as their most ordinary selves, even if they were already battered, bloody, and at a total loss—as long as He Yu heard Xie Qingcheng say *It hurts*, as long as Xie Qingcheng saw He Yu reach out to him for help, they would always stop in their lonely tracks, turn back, and seek to comfort the anguished cries of their kin.

Once Xie Qingcheng had recentered himself, he had more questions to ask. “And what about Duan Wen?” he said, in a quiet voice. He wanted to know how He Yu had spent these past three years on both sides of the conflict. It was the Mandela Syndicate's turn. “Project Dreambreaker was guarded against you; I know Mandela must have been the same. You screwed over Duan Wen once already, three years ago. You pretended to give your allegiance to them, only to expose the coordinates of their island stronghold. I can barely believe he accepted you a second time. Was it

because of the loyalty chip?" Xie Qingcheng's voice wavered. "The one he implanted inside your heart?"

"No," He Yu murmured. "If that chip worked, I would have died a hundred times over by now. I eventually discovered that the loyalty chip doesn't work on me at all—and so did Duan Wen and his people."

Xie Qingcheng was surprised. "Why not?"

"It's probably because of my special constitution," said He Yu. "Maybe my blood toxin powers even have the capacity to interfere with the chip if I don't want to cooperate. So Duan Wen can't use that to confirm my loyalty, but..." He paused for a moment. "There are certain reasons he chose to believe he could control me this time too."

A niggling suspicion came to Xie Qingcheng. "Like what?"

He Yu stopped for even longer than before. When he finally spoke, it was to confirm Xie Qingcheng's hypothesis. "My mother."

Silence.

"Vivian. The real Lü Zhishu."

Turning sideways under the covers, he pulled them up until he and Xie Qingcheng were fully in the dark. He shifted closer, but stopped before they were fully pressed together. Though it wasn't a fully apt analogy, Xie Qingcheng was reminded of a weeklong spat he'd once had with his deskmate back in school. By the end, even though they hadn't resolved the argument, Xie Qingcheng was sick of fighting. He'd opened up a snack bag and offered it to her, asking if she wanted some or not.

Also wanting to make up, she had accepted the bag. For a time after that, their every interaction became especially cautious. They completely avoided the subject of their dispute, and were laughably polite with each other in every interaction, hiding fear that they'd accidentally poke at a sore spot behind each strained smile. His relationship with He Yu was in a similar state. Fragile and breakable like a newly repaired piece of porcelain, the sealant still wet. He had to handle it with absolute care.

Afraid to get any closer, He Yu shut his eyes. This distance was only just close enough for the faint scent of Xie Qingcheng's body to flood his lungs. That cold, almost bitter scent could hardly be considered fragrant,

but it comforted He Yu a great deal. His throat bobbed, and when he began his story, his voice was hoarse.

“My mother is still in their laboratory.”

The revelation shocked Xie Qingcheng.

“My mother’s body, to be precise, flash-frozen with liquid nitrogen. They told me that they can bring her back to life.”

“How is that possible?”

“It’s not possible in the biological sense, but using virtual reality, something like it is fully plausible,” He Yu explained. “The Mandela Syndicate is very interested in the human brain. See, by combining VR, 5D effects, magnetic field interference, and audio, scent, and video projection, they can create a perfect virtual reality projection here—inspired by the notorious psychological phenomenon of the Mandela effect. They believe that studying the human mind is the only key to unlocking the limits of life and death.

“To give a simple example, the poet Li Bai is a man who died a thousand years ago. In our ordinary conception of time and space, people of our time could never speak to him. But since he recorded a portion of his thoughts and experiences in text, and these texts were passed down continuously through the years, we can hear the words of a man who died a thousand years ago and know some of the details of his life. His physical form can’t escape the limits of time and space, but his ideas did. That’s the fundamental tenet behind the Mandelaverse.

“However, text is the most basic of mediums. It’s a fixed and temporary photograph. If we still use Li Bai as our example, all that broke the limits of time and space was a limited portion of his ideas. He couldn’t record every single thought in his texts, and the words he left behind are fixed. They can’t think on their own, or continue to generate ideas that he would have had—but what if there was a technology that could extract and preserve a person’s mind in full?”

He tapped Xie Qingcheng’s temple. “A person’s soul is right in here. If it could leave the body and still exist inside a different system, continuing to generate consciousness, wouldn’t that mean that person is still alive? Just like the soul-transfer rituals that crop up in various religions, the kind that

people consider utterly fantastical. If we were to achieve that in reality, then as far as the Mandela Syndicate is concerned, even if a person's physical body perished, they'd remain alive long as their mind is preserved.

"If human consciousness can be perpetuated eternally through technology, can be deposited into the cloud, a robotic form, or even another living person's body with the aid of a chip," He Yu said quietly, "then what people call 'resurrection' and 'immortality' will have been achieved."

"They want...eternal life?!"

"That's far from where it ends. The Mandela Syndicate's ultimate vision is a humankind that no longer needs flesh bodies to survive. After all, the planet has a maximum carrying capacity. If everyone were immortal, we'd run out of room for new life eventually. But if they can construct a metaverse according to their vision, that's a different story. Human minds can be stored in the cloud as data, living inside computer systems, breaking the wall between the virtual and the real. Everyone can live, but no one needs to be alive. Humanity will exist, think, and labor inside of databases...with only incredibly accomplished or incredibly rich digital humans gaining the right to a normal physical body like everyone has now."

As He Yu continued, this spine-chilling scene rolled out before Xie Qingcheng's eyes.

"In their vision of the future, the world is a utopia. The number of humans who exist in a physical form is under strict control, so our natural resources will slowly recover. But this hardly limits the development of human society; after all, they'll have vast numbers of digital humans to take advantage of, living and producing in the cloud-hosted metaverse, continuing to provide labor output. Billions, hundreds of billions of people could live inside a single little hard drive. Digital humans will have to work continuously to earn a ticket to a physical body, only to then have to fight their way up the ladder in the real world. And the ability to bring someone into that real world will lie firmly within the hands of political leaders and capital owners."

A chill ran down Xie Qingcheng's back. It wasn't the idea itself that was so frightening, but the fact that given the direction in which science was furiously developing, its implementation was fully possible. Humans would turn their kin into digital beings, compressing the blood and flesh

they were born with into streams of data. Those in charge would control whether others could join real society, that decision depending on who was needed or who possessed enough wealth.

Even more terrifying, digital humans would be customarily treated as a disposable resource. If real humans wanted to edit them, delete them, or control their thoughts, all it would take would be writing a quick script. They wouldn't even need to bother with propaganda. Once this became business as usual, no one would protest anymore, or else they'd be treated as a virus threatening the system.

"That's preposterous..." Xie Qingcheng muttered.

"It's not preposterous at all," He Yu countered. "If technology proceeds with no limitations, this could happen within the century. Isn't a lot of modern society already digitized and homologizing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Before the popularization of the internet, there were huge differences in people's accents, how they spoke, and what they said. Everyone was unique. But then, through the high-bandwidth communication channel of the internet, repetition became the new normal. Individuals assimilated into the collective. For example...when you were young, if you watched a movie in class and the teacher broke everyone into small discussion groups for you to each share your thoughts, each person would have something different to say. But now, when you open up the chat on a movie stream, you'll see everyone repeating the same thing. When someone comments 'I'm sobbing,' nearly every comment that follows will be those same two words.

"And people's patience for complicated works of art is decreasing more and more. These days there's only an audience for crude and simple depictions of good and evil, love or rejection. But they forget that human nature is inherently contradictory—it can't be encompassed in a set of simple labels. Definitional simplicity makes people comfortable, makes them feel like a work is uncontroversial and easy to understand. But that comfort and sense of safety just makes it easier and easier for people to refuse to think for themselves, to become accustomed to not thinking for themselves. Once not thinking becomes a habit, when a person needs to express their own thoughts on something, the only opinions they can

produce are the same few things repeated all over the internet. That's why you see the same few phrases being applied to all kinds of things. Praise, criticism, hatred, and creativity become monotonous, like..."

He paused, before finally concluding: "Like thoughts all produced on the same assembly line."

Xie Qingcheng narrowed his eyes. Traditionally, assembly lines only produced physical goods. But when he thought about it, if more and more people could only repeat the same simple phrases, if trash media and digital brainwashing led them to abandon their ability to think for themselves, weren't the things they said and the actions they took essentially the products of a metaphorical "assembly line"?

It was a frightening state to be in. People turned into assembly line products typically lost their ability to rise above mediocrity, already assimilated into the masses. As this force of assimilation grew, more and more would be sucked into its torrent.

"Think about it, Xie Qingcheng," said He Yu. "What continuously repeats the ideas fed to it, and only acts according to direct commands or indirect guidance?"

An answer was on the tip of Xie Qingcheng's tongue. "...Artificial intelligence," he muttered.

"That's right. As the Mandela Syndicate defines the concept, artificial intelligence doesn't just refer to man-made programs. It can also refer to living human beings brainwashed into becoming 'artificial intelligence.' The signature behaviors of artificial intelligence are repetition, assimilation, and submission. If their brainwashing succeeds, all the kindness, rationality, and perceptiveness characteristic of humanity will dim—or even disappear. They'll become as cold, cruel, and guiltless as machines. Guilt, gratitude, and pity are the higher-level emotions of living beings, not artificial intelligence. This deficiency is a symptom of the degeneration of the human heart, and it's a symptom already beginning to appear in modern society."

Silently, Xie Qingcheng took all this in.

"The metaverse isn't a baseless fantasy," He Yu insisted. "It is entirely achievable. By the time they manage it, the people who control the technology will be the creator deities of the virtual world, able to bend the

universe to their will. Nowadays, coercing society into accepting a new idea could take five, ten years. But in the metaverse, it might only take a single keystroke.”

After a few moments’ pause, he continued, “The Mandela Syndicate wants possession of the most advanced technology in this new industrial revolution so they can become the absolute gods of the world that follows. This is the final goal their decades of efforts are building to.”

When he finished, the room was dead silent.

Xie Qingcheng’s body felt colder than ever before as he ruminated over what He Yu had said. These ideas seemed so far and unreachable. But to extrapolate from the course of history, could the people writing letters home in the year 1900 have imagined that one day, a device like a little mirror would let you see and speak to your loved ones from across the world? It had been a mere century since then. Who could say what the world would look like in another hundred years? The Mandela Syndicate was full of tech extremists; it made sense for their ideology to be a century or two ahead of the rest of the world.

“So the people being controlled are people that the Mandela Syndicate brainwashed and turned into weapons?” he asked.

“That’s right. Take your parents, for example—they might be gone, but what the Mandela Syndicate did was collect a large volume of videos, notes, and combat records from when they were alive. They use that to create a model of their minds, and then they brainwash other living people with that model. That’s why they acted like your real parents after they were freed from Zoya’s control—but they’re fake. And the real people they used to be are already brain-dead, with no capacity for thought. There’s no saving them, so I hope you won’t feel guilty over it.”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t speak. As preposterous it was, encountering those berserkers had lit up a faint ray of hope inside him. And now that light finally died out, soundless and unseen. “When you put it that way, it really is just virtual reality. Just like everything else on this island: all illusory, no more than a mirage.”

“That’s right.”

“Then if I see those robots again...”

“You’ll see their true forms, just a couple of enhanced humans.” Collecting himself, He Yu continued, “But if you want to see what Mandela Island looks like to ordinary people, do it through a camera lens. The effects of the simulation are achieved through a variety of interferences. They touch all five senses, and the visual portion is basically just a VR projection. You saw the island’s drones, right?”

“Yes.”

“Those drones are one set of interference devices for creating visual illusions. It’s just like the holograms in *Spider-Man*.”

“I never watched *Spider-Man*.”

“The Virtual Teresa Teng Music Magical Show?”

“No.”

“...Never mind. My point was, your eyes can no longer be deceived, but cameras will still capture the image of the VR. It’s the same effect as TV recordings of the Virtual Teresa Teng Music Magical Show.”

Xie Qingcheng cut in. “Does this mean that if we destroy the drones projecting the illusion, normal people will be able to see the true state of the island?”

He Yu shook his head. “Creating false images is only the simplest requirement of VR. Mandela Island is also generating auditory, scent, and magnetic field interference. Just destroying the drones wouldn’t do much. They’d put their systems into emergency mode and be able to keep up the lie. And all these drones are being monitored live—if any of them are destroyed, Duan Wen will know someone’s leaking information, because ordinary people can’t see them and everyone on their side is controlled by a loyalty chip. Aside from me. I’m the only possible leaker.

“The most thorough way to destroy the illusions, and the only way to destroy them completely, would be to find the central machine controlling all the virtual reality devices. If we can find it and destroy it, all the projectors will stop at once. The hyenas will go back to being hyenas, the humans back to being humans, the drones back to being drones, and the concrete castle will be a concrete castle again. Normal humans will be able to see the truth unaided.”

His eyes dimmed. “I’ve been trying to find the central switch all these years—it has to exist, but I haven’t been able to find it on my own. But none of the others trust me. They’d rather throw human lives away trying to invade the island by force. And now they’ve come up against the frost laser, a true weapon of mass destruction Mandela only just invented.

“Project Dreambreaker’s trust in me plummeted even further after its first appearance. I know some of them think I was concealing intel about it on purpose, which is why they insisted on sending their own people to investigate...” Vision glazed with irony, He Yu closed his eyes. “And thus, Captain Zheng became a sacrifice, condemned to the dungeon.”

“Lao-Zheng, Chen Man, and the first team to make landfall—are they all in the dungeon?”

His face stiffened at the mention of Chen Man, but He Yu still answered with an affirmative.

“The Mandela Syndicate still hasn’t used them for any experiments?” Xie Qingcheng pressed.

“Not yet,” replied He Yu. “Living human specimens are rare. They usually wouldn’t start right away.”

That brought Xie Qingcheng a little bit of comfort. “At this point, there’s nothing else we can do. The data Lao-Zheng and I collected was ninety-seven percent uploaded when you stopped the transfer in front of Zoya. We need to send this data to headquarters right away.”

“Understood. I’ll find a chance to resend it tomorrow morning; it won’t be too hard. I’ve sent a lot of Mandela Island secrets to Project Dreambreaker over the years—their map of the headquarters was drawn with my cooperation. But speaking of that...” He trailed off, staring into Xie Qingcheng’s eyes in the darkness. “Did you steal data from my office while I had you under house arrest and give it to our commander?”

Xie Qingcheng hadn’t expected him to bring that up out of the blue. He paused, then told the truth. “How did you find out?”

“I checked the security cams after you left and found a few oddities. I called our commander, and he confirmed it.”

He was a little curious why He Yu hadn't sent that final report to their commander right away, even though he already had the files. But from what He Yu had told him, Xie Qingcheng had a guess. "You wanted to tell him one last time, before you handed over the files, that Mandela Island runs as a metaverse. That it's all quite ordinary underneath the illusions, nothing to fear once you flip the central switch."

He Yu was silent for a moment. "Yes. No matter if he believed me or not, I wanted to give it one last try. But you ended up taking the data and giving it to him ahead of schedule."

This left Xie Qingcheng briefly tongue-tied. "...I apologize."

But He Yu just shook his head. "And you? Why hand over the data, even though you'd already guessed that I was Project Dreambreaker's spy?"

"At that point, it was only a guess. I never had real evidence that you were one of us. I figured that if you were a spy, the commander would be one of the scant few people who knew—I needed his confirmation. I wanted an answer before I came to the island, to know that I hadn't guessed wrong."

"So that's why you were so calm when I told you that I was the informant. It wasn't just a guess—you'd already confirmed..." Xie Qingcheng nodded. He Yu finally understood. He murmured, "But if he told you about me, he should have informed me..." He froze.

He knew why the commander hadn't notified him—because in the end, Project Dreambreaker didn't trust him. The information they gave him was only partial, and they always kept a few aces up their sleeve.

Xie Qingcheng could tell what he was thinking from the look on his face, so he tried to reassure him. "It was an emergency situation. He has far too many things to manage, and with the final push so near, he wanted to minimize the number of unknowns. It's not too surprising that he wanted to stay on the safe side and not explain too much." He stopped for a moment. "He probably also thought it was an unimportant detail, that we would work it out once we met face-to-face."

Thinking about how chaotic their first encounter on the island had been, they both sank into silence. Realizing just how awkward the topic was, Xie Qingcheng tried to change the subject. "Oh, right, did you ever

wonder why this island is set up so much like Huzhou University's Neverland?"

He Yu gathered himself in turn. "That might have something to do with a fact I just discovered, something I haven't had the chance to tell headquarters yet—it has to do with that boy's true identity. He's probably —"

They were interrupted by a series of knocks at the door.

The two of them both jolted, holding their breaths in the darkness. Remaining calm, He Yu raised one hand and pressed his fingertips to Xie Qingcheng's lips—*Pretend to sleep. Don't make a sound.* The person knocked three or four more times, then stopped.

"He Yu."

It was Duan Wen.

He was right at the door. His tone was mild, without betraying a single emotion, nor making it clear what he wanted. "Could you open up for a second, please?"

Chapter 220: Living Under Supervision

THOUGH IT WAS ALREADY MORNING, He Yu hadn't gone to the lab yet; he'd been far too worried about Xie Qingcheng. He hadn't thought Duan Wen would do him the honor of paying him a visit in person if he didn't show up.

Thoughts flew through He Yu's head in quick succession. All of his sensitive conversations with Xie Qingcheng had been under the blankets; they shouldn't have been exposed. Duan Wen must just have been curious to have a look at his special captive. Xie Qingcheng's flare-up had made He Yu uneasy, and he was reluctant to let Duan Wen see him, lest he figure out something was off. Now that he knew Xie Qingcheng trusted him again after so many years, he didn't want to hold what had happened during that sea battle against him.

The things Xie Qingcheng had said during his psychological Ebola episode were sincere.

He would protect Xie Qingcheng.

"Don't worry about it. Go to sleep. Get some rest." He Yu said quietly into Xie Qingcheng's ear, "I can handle him."

As He Yu got up, Xie Qingcheng caught his hand. "Be careful."

"Don't worry. I've been dealing with him for three years by now." He Yu got dressed, mentally prepared himself, and opened the door.

In the hallway outside stood Duan Wen. He was a man of about forty years of age, with a refined aura and an unreadable expression, appearing practically emotionless. He looked He Yu up and down, eyes landing on the unbuttoned front of He Yu's Mandela military jacket.

"Looks like Boss He had a good time last night," he remarked. "Could I come inside?"

"Boss Duan, I'm afraid that would be inconvenient."

"Oh?"

A cough. "He's still asleep," He Yu said with a smile.

"...Oh." Duan Wen raised one eyebrow. He looked He Yu up and down again and smiled in turn. "Ah, to be young."

He Yu kept one hand propped against the doorframe, polite but not ceding an inch.

For a moment, Duan Wen mused in silence. "He didn't put up a fight last night?"

He Yu leaned in with a roguish grin, whispering as if the two of them were sharing some great secret. "I used a beast-taming pill. He didn't have the strength to fight."

That eyebrow crept even higher on Duan Wen's forehead. "Oh..."

Drawing back, He Yu looked down to fix his buttons. "What did Boss Duan need me for?" he asked, feigning nonchalance.

"Nothing much," said Duan Wen. "I just wanted to congratulate you."

"...Congratulate me for what?" He Yu looked back up, smile staying fixed on his face even as alarm rose in his chest.

Duan Wen stared fixedly into his eyes with a faint smile. "I wanted to congratulate Boss He on getting what he wanted... For capturing the person you wanted to possess. But..."

Every muscle in He Yu's body tensed as he stared, unmoving, at Duan Wen.

After a few seconds, a smile spread across Duan Wen's face. "You still have to show up at the lab on time. The blood toxin needs to be trained."

He Yu let out a small sigh of relief and gave his assent. Duan Wen's gaze slid toward the bedroom door, but He Yu stood up straight to block his line of sight—his eyes moved back to He Yu.

"You haven't had breakfast yet, have you? If you don't mind, why don't we eat together downstairs? We can discuss a few things about the project over the meal."

He Yu stared at him for a moment. "Let me wash up first."

"Go on." A moment later, Duan Wen added, "Keep the door open."

With Duan Wen watching at the door, He Yu couldn't communicate with Xie Qingcheng in any way, but at least he could shut the bedroom door. Now Duan Wen couldn't bother Xie Qingcheng even if the front door was open. He quickly washed up in the living room bathroom, then returned to the entranceway.

"Let's go."

Duan Wen had a private dining room just downstairs. When they walked in, the servants had already set the table with a spread of exquisite dishes and cups of steaming coffee, creating a relaxed atmosphere entirely at odds with the oppressive mood of the island outside.

"Xie Qingcheng is a member of Project Dreambreaker," said Duan Wen, plopping two sugar cubes into his coffee as he took his seat and stirring it with his spoon. "For our safety, I shouldn't allow you to keep him at your side during such a sensitive time." He looked up at He Yu—and at the look on his face, he let out a chuckle. "But don't worry, I can make an exception for you."

This let He Yu relax a little, but he didn't let down his guard. "...You have my gratitude."

"You're welcome." Duan Wen raised his coffee cup and took a sip, staring out toward the window. "After all, this was one of your conditions." He studied the flowers on the windowsill. "We had our initial discussion here too, didn't we?"

"...Mm."

He could no longer lie to himself; He Yu knew he still loved Xie Qingcheng. In the last three years, he had watched that recording from his twentieth birthday over and over, cracked the firewall of Xie Qingcheng's phone to look at its data again and again. His health had been poor during that time, and he hadn't been able to leave Mandela Island—not that Duan Wen would have allowed him to even if he could. Thousands of miles between Australia and America had separated him and Xie Qingcheng, and all he could do was long for him day and night.

But Xie Qingcheng almost never used his phone, or sent any texts. That was the type of person he was. Even when he and He Yu were at the

height of their entanglement, every message he sent was entirely mundane. Xie Qingcheng didn't like to waste his time on texting; he was a traditional man, more accustomed to calling or speaking face-to-face. So despite He Yu's hacking abilities, there wasn't too much information about his life He Yu could actually gather. All he could do was watch that one video over and over until it was practically growing calluses.

Not once had he denied his desire for Xie Qingcheng, and one day, Duan Wen had invited him to his dining room for a chat. He asked, "Xie Qingcheng deceived you for the sake of his righteous values. Don't you hate him?"

"I do."

"But you still want him." This was more of a statement than a question. He Yu didn't reply. "Do you think he ever loved you?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think he'll get with anyone else?"

The mere thought of it made madness rise in He Yu's heart, his pupils turning red. He didn't answer this question either. "Duan Wen," he said, "promise me one thing."

Duan Wen stared at the crimson flowers swaying on the windowsill. "Tell me."

"When I find Xie Qingcheng again, I'm going to bring him back here. No matter how he sees me, no matter if he's remarried or with someone new—so long as he's still alive, I'll trap him here on Mandela Island. I'll lock him up by my side, and pay him back a hundred times for what I've suffered."

Duan Wen turned halfway back around, his eyes sliding over to He Yu, filled with interest. He Yu had just undergone surgery, and he was still pale as a ghost. "And what if he's dead?"

"I'll still bring him back," said He Yu. "Even if I have to turn him into a preserved specimen, I want him—it's what he owes me, and he *will* pay me back."

Those eyes moved back to the flowers silhouetted against the daylight. "You're mad, He Yu. If Xie Qingcheng knew this was what you

wanted, he'd make sure he didn't even leave behind a body after he died."

A wry smile tugged at the corner of He Yu's mouth. "Even if he turns to ash, I'll swallow whatever's left. Like I said—it's what he owes me. He sacrificed my life to protect someone else. I'll hate him for a lifetime."

Now, He Yu sat across from Duan Wen in those exact same positions, the exact same variety of flower blooming on the windowsill. Suddenly, Duan Wen asked, "And are you happy now?"

He Yu didn't respond right away. He lit a cigarette, enveloping himself in a cloud of Marlboro smoke. In the course of their three-year acquaintance, He Yu had come to a certain conclusion about Duan Wen. For whatever reason, the man was fascinated by human nature. He didn't experience many emotions of his own, but he vicariously observed other people's joys and sorrows.

He Yu didn't want to cause any trouble. It was best to give Duan Wen a little something to keep him satisfied. He took another puff of his cigarette before he replied. "How should I put it? It's pain, it's torture; it's at once excitement and sorrow."

As expected, Duan Wen perked up in interest. "Why?"

"This Xie Qingcheng belongs to me, but not in his entirety. His body is in my bed, but his heart belongs to another," said He Yu. "Three years ago, Xie Qingcheng chose to deceive me to save Chen Man. Now, three years later, those two are together. Chen Man stole away my last breath of oxygen in this world. So though I might have Xie Qingcheng with me now, I'm still unhappy."

Duan Wen tilted his head and spun the handle of his spoon, seemingly pondering He Yu's response.

He Yu's words were sincere. He and Xie Qingcheng didn't want to continue hurting each other, so he hadn't said a word about Chen Man, even though it still agonized him deep down. The peace between him and Xie Qingcheng was too hard-earned—he couldn't bear to break it.

In the end, Duan Wen said, "Could you give me a cigarette?" He Yu pushed the box in his direction, and Duan Wen lit one and took a drag. "You should be careful keeping him prisoner," he said. "In my experience, people like him don't submit easily to any kind of pressure. Once he recovers his

strength, he'll either fight back and kill you, or he'll fail and kill himself. Don't let your emotions take over and leave you starring in a tragedy."

Although they sounded like caring words, He Yu was ill at ease. Carefully maintaining his act, he observed Duan Wen's every microexpression through the haze of smoke. But Duan Wen was an iron wall. It was impossible to discern even a single one of his true feelings.

In the end, Duan Wen just smiled. "Is there something on my face?"

"No." He Yu lowered his head, taking a bite of food before changing the subject. "How is great-grandmother doing?"

"Not well," said Duan Wen. "Project Dreambreaker has been restless, so none of our people can leave, for the time being. And who knows when we'll finally find the First Emperor's dossier?"

He Yu's knife scraped across the plate with a screech.

Duan Wen's pitch-black eyes flicked upward, fixing him under their gaze. "What is it?"

Tossing the knife away, He Yu met stared unblinking back at Duan Wen. "If you need my help, just say the word. I may not be able to leave, but I can get into the internal systems of any number of companies to search for clues. I want great-grandmother to live, too. And I'm still waiting for you to follow through on your second promise—bringing my mother back to life."

With a considering look, Duan Wen smiled. "Of course."

The treacherous meal finally came to a close. As He Yu left the dining room on his way to the lab, Duan Wen suddenly called after him, "You can't keep a skylark in too small a cage."

He looked back.

Still wearing that face devoid of any emotion, Duan Wen cryptically murmured two more words: "It'll die."

Though he thought there might be something complicated in Duan Wen's gaze, when He Yu took a closer look, he only saw a field of blank, empty white.

"Go on," Duan Wen said.

After a moment's hesitation, He Yu nodded and turned to go.

He couldn't return to his quarters right away; he could sense that Duan Wen was testing him. It had barely been a day since he captured Xie Qingcheng, and his plan was to give Duan Wen the impression that the only reason he insisted on having him was because he hated him so much. If he broke now and acted like he cared too much about Xie Qingcheng's health, it would arouse suspicion.

There was also the issue of the frost laser data that he needed to send back to Dreambreaker headquarters. Without time to go back to his room, sending the information would be no easy matter. As the atmosphere of impending battle grew heavier and heavier, every system on the island was receiving constant upgrades. He Yu didn't find a loophole to slip through until the end of the day.

He let out a small sigh of relief when he was done. Checking his watch, he found that it was already eleven o'clock at night. He gathered his things and headed back to where Xie Qingcheng was.

But as he was passing the laundry room, he heard a middle-aged woman whispering something behind the door. He was on high alert immediately. These days, no one entered his room aside from these servants; even Duan Wen showed him a modicum of respect by not barging in without notice. But that didn't mean he wouldn't send the servants in to do something on his behalf. That was how his room had ended up infested with pinhole cameras, after all.

He Yu stopped in his tracks, standing silently outside the laundry room and watching through the crack in the door. As expected, the one speaking was the servant responsible for cleaning his rooms. She held a basket of used bedsheets, and some sort of device was placed on the cabinet beside her.

The woman furtively whispered into the communicator, "That's right, Boss Duan. I checked with your detector...there's no semen on the bedsheets. They must have been lying to you, putting on an act!" She spoke rapidly, afraid she'd be discovered. After a few more sentences, she turned to look over her shoulder, and He Yu ducked to the side of the doorframe to avoid her overstrung inspection.

He wasn't spotted this time, but he knew he wouldn't get away with lingering any longer. Fortunately, he had already gotten the most important piece of intel: Duan Wen suspected him after all. Even after all those probing questions that morning, he still doubted his motives for detaining Xie Qingcheng. He Yu gritted his teeth, heart like ice in his chest—now, Duan Wen would know that he had lied during their breakfast together...

But he quickly calmed himself.

It's fine... It should be fine. This one lie wouldn't be enough for Duan Wen to know for sure that his motive wasn't revenge. It was his personal business, after all; it made sense for him to be reluctant to talk about it. One of the details he'd given that morning also supported his story—that he had given Xie Qingcheng a drug to make him weak and pliable. It was fully possible that Xie Qingcheng was too weak, or the drug had hit him too hard, making He Yu lose interest. This one lie wouldn't ruin him. But...

With a face of stone, He Yu took a detour to head back to his rooms from another direction. He opened the biometric lock and pushed open the door. Xie Qingcheng was seated at the desk with his eyes closed—at the sound of the door, they slowly opened.

He Yu looked at the bed—the sheets were new. The servants had used their cleaning rotation as an excuse to inspect their bedsheets. His suspicions confirmed, he walked over to Xie Qingcheng, expression dark. He leaned in and, in a voice only Xie Qingcheng could hear, said, “Xie Qingcheng, we have a problem.”

Xie Qingcheng tensed. “What?”

Lips grazing his ear, He Yu stared straight ahead, cleared his throat, and awkwardly stated, “I don't know how to say this, but basically...we won't be getting away with it if we don't do *something* tonight.”

Chapter 221: We Wanted to Put on a Show

TO HE YU'S SURPRISE, Xie Qingcheng was entirely nonplussed.

He had come to the exact same realization. His mind as sharp as ever, he'd realized something was wrong as soon as a servant came in to change their sheets. Even hotel staff wouldn't normally change the bedsheets every single day, and this was He Yu's permanent place of residence. The bedsheets had been clean, obviously changed not long ago; there was no reason to change them again.

Xie Qingcheng knew Duan Wen wanted to check whether the two of them had had relations; after all, if He Yu was only acting out of his own desire, there was no way he would entirely abstain now that he had him captured. Duan Wen was no idiot. Nor did he trust He Yu very much. He'd sent a pawn to check if He Yu might be plotting something.

What a disgusting maneuver—but at this point, they had no other choice. They had to keep up the act, and make it look as real as they could.

The atmosphere between them became extremely strange that night. Xie Qingcheng and He Yu were no longer arguing, but that was as far as it went. Neither of them had given any explanation for the emotional side of things, because neither of them felt they had the right. You could only explain your emotions to someone who cared about them in the first place. If the other person didn't even care, bringing them up of your own accord was nothing short of arrogance.

Finding the commonalities between situations was a skill of Xie Qingcheng's, and to him, this current situation was just like when Li Ruoqiu had come to see him on New Years' Eve four years ago. If she'd suddenly said "Xie-ge, I have no feelings for him; we aren't in a relationship," as her ex, he would only have found it awkward and off-putting.

Do not do unto others what you do not want others to do unto you. He knew he had hurt He Yu to the core. Though He Yu may have set aside

his grudge, there was no way that love would still linger. If he said to He Yu now, “He Yu, I have no feelings for Chen Man; we aren’t in a relationship,” surely He Yu would only find that off-putting, too.

A STEM man through and through, Xie Qingcheng thought his analysis scored a hundred points.

As for He Yu? He was even smarter, of course.

He had confessed to Xie Qingcheng, he had been beaten and bloody for Xie Qingcheng. He had given so much, but Xie Qingcheng had never accepted his feelings. Instead, he always drew a clear line between sex and love, and kept telling him not to waste his affection on someone who could be his uncle. Even after seeing the shattered Charmander figurine, he had been rejected so many times that he didn’t even have the courage to wonder if Xie Qingcheng might fall for him. His attitude was steeped entirely in self-deprecation. He believed no one wanted him and lashed out in response, but at the same time, he had no self-confidence.

Oh, Xie Qingcheng probably only kept that Charmander figurine out of guilt for my death, the cultured youth ruminated sorrowfully. *It doesn’t mean anything.*

Well, if neither of them loved the other anymore, the peace they managed to achieve was more than enough. Certain topics could be left well enough alone. Just like a pair of middle schoolers who liked each other but hadn’t worked up the courage to confess, neither of them wanted to cross that line. Instead they tried to guess what the other was thinking, tiptoeing around each other in uneasy movements. Neither of them had the courage, nor felt like they had the right, to spill the love and regrets they still held deep within their hearts.

The two of them washed up and got into bed. With the down blanket drawn overhead, the world shrank down to the two of them, lying face-to-face. They could hardly see each other in the darkness, and so they identified each other by the puff of their breath, like a pair of dragons in a dim-lit den.

“Do you know what I’m thinking right now?” He Yu whispered.

He smelled faintly of tobacco. Xie Qingcheng had cut down on his smoking in the past few years, but the scent still filled him with a certain

deeply embedded craving. Gathering himself, he said, “What?”

“I feel like we’re a fake married couple on the hidden front of the Civil War, working for the organization by day and keeping up the act for the spies watching us through the crack in our bedroom door by night. Acting twenty-four seven, every hour of every day.”

Xie Qingcheng sighed. The kid’s screenwriting and directing background was showing. “...So, did you finish today’s spy mission?”

“I did.”

The frost laser data had been successfully sent back to headquarters. Armed with this intel, Project Dreambreaker would soon launch its all-out assault. In the meantime, their mission was to infiltrate Mandela as best they could in order to assist from the inside. The longer they lasted, the better.

During times of war, Xie Qingcheng would have made an excellent spy. He almost never let himself have any emotions of his own, and he was excellent at prioritizing. Matters of the flesh weren’t too consequential to him. If they had to have relations of some sort, in this bed, to dispel Duan Wen’s suspicions, he would do it out of concern for the bigger picture.

Instead, it was He Yu who exhibited a certain youthful awkwardness. A certain amount of shame filled him at the thought of his past misdeeds, and he didn’t want to upset Xie Qingcheng. Holding the blanket up off his face, he dawdled for a long time before he asked, “So...um...are you willing to...?”

A long silence.

After everything that had happened, for the first time in years, Xie Qingcheng found a smidgen of humor amid his repression. Looking at him now, he suddenly found himself reminded of He Yu’s nineteen-year-old self. After a moment of silence, he said, “Hm? Willing to what?”

Without realizing that Xie Qingcheng was teasing him on purpose, an even more awkward He Yu said, “Just...that.”

“I don’t understand.”

He gave Xie Qingcheng a helpless glance, but as soon as their eyes met, He Yu started. “You know what I’m talking about.”

Caught red-handed, Xie Qingcheng felt a bit awkward himself. He coughed. “Well...we have no other choice.”

This cavalier attitude surprised He Yu. Before, he would have wanted to ask—*Don't you care about Chen Yan's feelings?* As for Xie Qingcheng, he had surely figured out that He Yu and Anthony weren't lovers in the couple of weeks He Yu had had him imprisoned. They were bed partners at most. Still, even that much would have perturbed him. If He Yu said such a thing, he certainly would have retorted, *And don't you give a fuck about Xie Lishen?*

But after Xie Qingcheng's flare-up, they had brought a lot of things out into the open—their feelings for each other aside. He Yu no longer wanted to hurt Xie Qingcheng, and Xie Qingcheng didn't want to talk about Anthony's antics.

They hadn't pulled out the blades they'd sunk into each other's flesh, the ones torturing both of them for far too long, but they weren't digging them any deeper either. It wasn't that they didn't care about each other's feelings, but when the two lonely dragons clashed, they both saw the scars that roped the other's body. They didn't want cause their kin more pain, even if they were still in agony themselves.

Despite all the egregious means he'd used to violate Xie Qingcheng, He Yu came across as helpless and green. “Then, then let's...”

“...Let's just think of it as work. We have no other choice, so let's not take it to heart. We can't break and fold to Duan Wen over a little thing like this.”

He Yu said nothing. There were many times they had ended up in bed together thanks to revenge, misunderstanding, obsession, or lingering affections. The one thing it had never been was businesslike to the point of awkwardness.

He lay there facing Xie Qingcheng for a while, still feeling like something wasn't quite right. After finally repairing their relationship to some degree, he didn't want to ruin it again by doing something rash. In the midst of this dilemma, the young man suddenly came up with an idea. He fumbled around at the side of the bed, pulling in a palm-sized object. For a split second, the deeply direct Xie Qingcheng thought he had grabbed a

condom—but a white light soon lit up their dark enclave under the covers instead.

Xie Qingcheng squinted. “Why your phone?”

A cough. “I know your health isn’t good, so...I thought, maybe we could just...could just put on an act?”

“Act? How?” Xie Qingcheng was confused.

He Yu grew even more awkward. He moistened his lips. “Like this. We still have to do something, but we could do it halfway. Just like a pair of actors doing a bed scene. As long as we can fool Duan Wen, it’ll be enough.”

Xie Qingcheng still didn’t understand. “...What do you mean by doing it halfway?”

There was no point beating around the bush with Xie Qingcheng; He Yu gave up trying. One wireless earbud went into his own ear, and he handed the other to Xie Qingcheng. “We could watch a film.”

Silence.

Young genius Mr. He’s plan was to satisfy himself with his own hand.

The earlier they resolved this little problem, the earlier they could start having a team meeting under the covers—unless, of course, his coworker accidentally riled him up to the point he could no longer resist. He Yu picked a website at random, the screen casting light across his handsome features. He intentionally kept a straight face, as if he and Xie Qingcheng were just discussing battle plans, as he browsed.

“What sort of thing do you like to watch?”

“...Do I have to watch it too?”

“...Can you do it without anything to watch?”

Watching something won’t make a difference, Xie Qingcheng thought to himself. He never had much interest in such things. The way he lost himself in desire with He Yu had always been thanks to He Yu’s arduous efforts to stoke his flames. How on earth could he say such a thing now?

But upon further consideration, although He Yu's suggestion sounded absurd at first, he realized it was the least damaging way for them to solve their problem. So he just said, "Do whatever, it's up to you."

He Yu picked a video with a high view count and good ratings from the home page. Xie Qingcheng inserted his one earbud, and they settled in to watch.

Both of them found the situation a little ridiculous. Who would have thought that one day, they'd find themselves under the covers enjoying a midnight special together? He Yu had clicked on a Western film; the lead actress was gorgeous and the production value was high. The director's heart and soul had obviously gone into the work. But even after watching for a considerable time, they both still felt nothing.

"What do you think?" He Yu asked.

"I'm not impressed."

"Let me find one in our own language," He Yu offered.

"...Fine."

He Yu pulled up a different film. Instead of a professional production, he found a Chinese amateur couple. The resolution absolutely plummeted. There was no artistry in the camerawork to speak of, but at least it was deeply passionate and all the dialogue was in their native language, stimulating their brains directly without being filtered through a mental translation.

A few minutes later, Xie Qingcheng frowned and said, "Does that woman look familiar to you?"

"...A little."

"She looks like one of my ex-coworkers, Nurse Zhou."

He hadn't been too invested in the first place, but at that mental association, He Yu immediately closed out of the browser window. "Let me find another one."

"Put some effort into it. Find something good."

Xie Qingcheng made this awkward yet salacious situation sound like a mentor guiding his mentee on how to make a PowerPoint presentation.

The awkwardness in He Yu's chest rose to critical levels. He left the website entirely and chose another, picking a thumbnail that looked appealing.

This time, the video featured two men. But the two *Homo sapiens* in this one had more chest hair than the chimpanzees in the zoo, with voices more jarring than a trumpeting elephant. Xie Qingcheng didn't make it a full minute before taking out his earbud. "We might as well be watching *Animal Planet*."

He Yu felt the same. What the hell was this?

He closed that site too and looked sideways at Xie Qingcheng. By the light of his phone, He Yu could clearly make out Xie Qingcheng's features at so close a distance. His gaze trailed along Xie Qingcheng's jade-pale cheek and his knife-carved brows, and lingered on those icy, misty peach-blossom eyes. No matter how much wild abandon the actors in those films displayed, none of them held a candle to one mild glance from Xie Qingcheng.

His feelings for Xie Qingcheng perturbed him deeply. He wanted his heart to harden into steel—why was it that every time he was at Xie Qingcheng's side, his heart would soften into a pathetic heap and he would want nothing more than to kiss those cool lips? The mere thought of it made his heart warm, and a set a fire alight in his belly.

Eyes turning red, he stared unblinking at Xie Qingcheng.

But Xie Qingcheng didn't notice. "Can't you find anything decent?"

He Yu was lost for words.

"Don't you have anything saved?"

All he could do was stare.

This was all asking too much of a child, Xie Qingcheng figured, to do this sort of thing with a person he had no feelings for—someone old enough to be his uncle. Maybe he should just take on the troublesome task himself. "Give me your phone. I'll help you look."

"And what experience do you have?" croaked He Yu. "I didn't find a single X-rated movie on your computer when I was helping you make your course materials."

With that on the table, both of them fell silent. They rarely brought up the past, the painful memories or the gentle ones, as if those bygone days were an open wound that would never heal. He Yu's thoughtless remark sent them back to their campus days of four years past, to the times when no mistakes had yet happened between them.

As He Yu stared at Xie Qingcheng's face and steeped in those memories, the redness in his eyes deepened, no longer solely from embarrassment and desire. Some other emotion had begun to creep in. He looked at Xie Qingcheng's blind eye, at his hair shot through with gray. He looked at this once-radiant person now burned down to a candle stub, gone from glowing to misshapen all in the years he'd missed.

That blind eye didn't belong to him, and neither did those white hairs. Instead he was being swallowed up by the ocean of time... Even as broken-down as he was, this person no longer belonged to him. He Yu had staggered out of destitution, crawled bloody from the pits of hell, only to find a broken Xie Qingcheng whose remaining pieces had been stolen away by someone else.

He didn't actually have it in him to be magnanimous and keep his cool; all his pretending not to care was just an unwillingness to hurt Xie Qingcheng any further. In truth, he couldn't let go, even now. With Xie Qingcheng, all he could feel was an intense, passionate love. Peace? Letting go? Closure? All of it was fake, an act he was putting on.

Finally sensing the danger in He Yu's expression, Xie Qingcheng fell silent. He tried to turn his face away, but it was too late.

Flipping on top of him, He Yu pressed Xie Qingcheng into the bed. As he held him by the jaw to prevent him from averting his gaze, a fire began to blaze in the sentimental youth's heart. Before Xie Qingcheng could react, his lips were claimed in a kiss, burning hot breath fanning over his skin and setting his heart alight. It was a wholly unskillful kiss, and it came with no warning—the lashing out of a wild beast forced into a corner.

He Yu wildly brutalized his lips, his chin, his neck. After he'd held back his emotions for so long, the breaching of that dam left He Yu practically possessed, and he attacked as if he might bite down and snap Xie Qingcheng's throat.

When the rough, urgent kiss concluded, He Yu sucked in a few heavy breaths, propping himself up under the covers and staring at Xie Qingcheng like prey he was about to disembowel. Finally, he murmured, “I actually do have a good one, but I was afraid you’d be mad if I brought it out... It’s the one I’ve kept watching all the time these past few years. I really...want to watch it with you, without arguing... To watch our own past... Will you partake with me, this time?”

Now Xie Qingcheng knew which clip He Yu was talking about.

Alarms blaring on red alert, he tried to struggle free, but He Yu only pressed the earbud back into Xie Qingcheng’s ear with one hand as he turned on his phone with the other. He swiped to the recording he always kept downloaded to his phone without even looking at the screen. The sounds of their own panting breaths from the rainy night of He Yu’s twentieth birthday entered their ears. After the close to three years he’d spent watching this clip, He Yu could recite what the two people in the video were doing without even looking, and could tell you exactly what was about to happen next.

Xie Qingcheng had known that He Yu had this clip since that day at the medical conference. He had even watched it himself—but seeing it again still came as a great shock.

“What do you think? Is this okay?”

Xie Qingcheng’s face blanched, but he refused to show any sign of weakness—he was the one who’d said to just treat it like business. He couldn’t be acting like a helpless youngster. He Yu was already offering a compromise: taking care of themselves to a film was the best option. So, affecting calm, he said, “I’m not so sure. Primarily because I don’t have a thing for watching myself on film. Why don’t we use something else.”

Staring at Xie Qingcheng, in the end He Yu couldn’t stop himself. “Xie Qingcheng,” he said, “did Anthony tell you that he slept with me every night, and that I showed him this video...?” When Xie Qingcheng didn’t respond, He Yu’s eyes lit up crimson in a combination of hurt, anger, and newly surging desire. “He was lying to you! He got this clip from Duan Wen; he’s a degenerate! I’m not the degenerate here! Who slept with him?! He’s lying! He’s smearing me!”

The words forming in Xie Qingcheng’s throat choked him.

From a rational standpoint, he had no say in whom He Yu slept with. He and He Yu had never officially been in any real relationship, never mind the fact that things had thoroughly soured between them long ago. They had nothing to do with each other anymore. He Yu had the freedom to sleep with whomever he wanted. Xie Qingcheng's biggest grievance was that Xie Lishen knew what had happened between them. Hearing He Yu deny telling him anything shook Xie Qingcheng to his core, turning his thoughts into a scattered mess.



“Forget who’s the degenerate here,” he sputtered in his wrong-footed confusion. “Let’s just pick something else...”

But He Yu’s desperation had once more turned him irrational, madness rising through him. He was so unfocused that he only half heard Xie Qingcheng, and the word “degenerate” was the only thing he parsed. This only tormented him further—did Xie Qingcheng think he wanted to watch this thing?

He’d had no one by his side for the last three years, not a single person... In all that time, his sole solace had been the lingering warmth of that night, which he could only grasp through this mirage. Whenever he surrendered to the impulse to watch it again, it often left him sad and exhausted, because he remembered how on the day of his twentieth birthday, Xie Qingcheng had said “happy birthday” to him. That was the only genuine well-wish he had ever received in his life.

He knew he was pitiful. In all his twenty years, only one person had sincerely treated him well. And yet he felt fortunate at the same time, because in his twentieth year, someone had finally shown him that sincerity. Little had he known then that his chance with that one person would also pass him by...

“I know what he told you...but it’s all false. It’s all false,” He Yu rasped. It was impossible to tell if he was more angry or hurt. “I never showed him the video. I never...I never told him our personal business!”

Between the situation at hand and He Yu’s emotional outburst, Xie Qingcheng could no longer comprehend him with any rationality. He couldn’t grasp any nuance. He Yu’s unhinged yet indescribably pitiful face was all that occupied his vision, and it lit his mind abuzz.

He Yu sucked in a deep breath, eyes crimson. He didn’t want to keep talking about Anthony. When he was with Xie Qingcheng, he didn’t want to talk about a single other soul. “Do you trust me? You said you would trust me.”

Silence.

“Xie Qingcheng, I’ve watched this video eighty, a hundred times. I like it a lot; I’m attached to it. I don’t want another one.” By now he was practically throwing a tantrum.

But he wasn't lying. Xie Qingcheng could feel the temperature steadily rising beneath the blankets, burning their mortal desires like firewood until a rock-solid, malevolent beast burst forth through the flames. He Yu's face was just as it had been in his youth—beautiful, almost delicate—but the wild beast he could unleash was a monstrous creature that could make a man shake in his boots.

Xie Qingcheng gathered himself. “You...”

“You said it yourself.” He Yu fought to restrain himself. There was a wronged and youthful tint to his voice, but every word was like the scrape of a predator's claws against the earth as it crept forward, preparing to lunge for its prey. “We have to take care of business tonight. It'll look more realistic if I rub it on the outside a little.”

He thrust his clothed hips against Xie Qingcheng's abdomen. Face pale, Xie Qingcheng clung to the sheets, but said nothing. *Motherfucker... forget it.* He gave up on rational thought as well. No matter what, he had to do *something* with He Yu tonight, because there was a pair of eyes watching from the shadows—watching to see if they were for real. Even if they planned to use their own hands instead of going all the way, the blocking had to look realistic.

In truth, they were being a little naive. How could two people who had once entangled so passionately, still now enmeshed in a dense web of emotional complexities, actually control themselves while acting out a sex scene for the cameras? The video continued to play in their earbuds. Pattering rain mixed with panting breaths, low murmurs, and the sounds of their coupling captured by the surveillance. Suddenly—

“Xie Qingcheng...Xie Qingcheng...I love you...” The muffled sound of twenty-year-old He Yu confessing to Xie Qingcheng mid-fuck, unable to help himself. “I love you...”

Across the distance of time, his voice spoke right into their ears. From the young man's mouth spilled the one greatest love of his life, repeating over and over into their headphones: “I love you.” At the unexpected sound of that familiar voice saying those familiar yet distant words, Xie Qingcheng started, as if someone had shot him right in the heart. All the blood in his body rushed to his chest.

He Yu paused as well.

He was afraid to look into Xie Qingcheng's eyes again, afraid he would lose his mind. He'd said it would only be a bit of rubbing. So he flipped him over onto his front, groped forcefully at that slender waist, and pressed his burning lips to Xie Qingcheng's still-healing back.

"Put your legs together, okay?" he murmured. Xie Qingcheng's exact condition was unknown to him, but he could tell it wasn't good. Burning with desire as he was, his actions were still rather restrained.

Looking over at his phone where he had tossed it aside, he saw the video had reached the point where they were frantically fucking in the back seat of the car. Xie Qingcheng had been wild that day, crying out unreservedly beneath He Yu. He Yu heard his own voice ask, "Does that feel good? To have me inside? Do you like it when I fuck you there?"

And there was the sound of his wrapped cock squelching in and out of Xie Qingcheng's body. Neither of them could take it. History had returned to haunt them like a dead soul on its seventh day, forcing every logical thought from their heads.

Xie Qingcheng lay there in the dark, head down and sprawled out like a butterfly trapped in a spider's web. Unable to escape, he could only shudder and fruitlessly flutter his wings... Caged in from all sides, he could see nothing, only offer his neck for the slaughter, like a fish on the chopping board. His imminent demise only sharpened his hearing and sensitivity to touch. He couldn't escape the lewd noises of his former entanglement with He Yu, while the present He Yu hovered over his back with a burning heat.

Hearing a series of rustling sounds behind him, he knew that He Yu was removing his underwear and Xie Qingcheng's clothes. He squeezed his eyes shut. Like a fleshy dragon emerging from its cave, a terrifyingly hot, hard length jutted out and jabbed into the space between his thighs.

Fingers twisted in the snow-white sheet, Xie Qingcheng trembled from head to toe. That thing was just too lethal, violently erect and leaking sticky fluid. It fucked him hard and deep from the start, using his closed thighs like a woman's cunt. It was even worse than being fucked for real; like this they really were two people forced to have sex for the sake of their mission, avoiding as much intimate contact as possible.

Head down, He Yu went at it without a sound. His frighteningly large cock soon left Xie Qingcheng's snowy inner thighs slippery and rubbed red.

Tensed and arching his back, Xie Qingcheng endured a torrential downpour of pounding, and the bed bounced beneath their bodies. He Yu's vigor nearly shoved Xie Qingcheng out from underneath the blankets.

But no matter how much He Yu lost control, he wouldn't willingly grant anyone else the sight of Xie Qingcheng getting fucked. One arm shot out to drag him back in by the shoulders, into the depths of the blankets. He enveloped him near completely, trapping him beneath his shadow, his hips never pausing for a second. Even if it was just thigh-fucking, their too-vigorous lovemaking sent wet slapping sounds echoing clearly across the room, no different from the sound of the real thing in the recording.

The only difference was that He Yu never spoke, and Xie Qingcheng was just as unwilling to make a sound. One plowed away with his head down, while the other, sweat-soaked, bore it to the best of his ability. What they failed to say the twenty-year-old He Yu and thirty-three-year-old Xie Qingcheng said on their behalf, their lustful voices pouring from the earbuds without pause.

"Ah...ah..." Xie Qingcheng moaned from the speaker, hoarse and broken, giving He Yu the false feeling that Xie Qingcheng really was wantonly throwing back his waist beneath him, legs spread wide as He Yu fucked his hole. Waves of heat rose from He Yu's belly, electric sparks shooting up his spine. He fucked Xie Qingcheng even harder, his thick shaft driving mercilessly further and further up the apex of Xie Qingcheng's thighs.

He Yu's shaft curved a little at full hardness, ferociously making itself known in all its veined, vigorous glory. When it plunged inside a person, this majestic cock could reach extraordinary depths. Even when it was only rubbing along the outside, the most vigorous thrusts would drag its bulbous head heatedly over a spot a little further up the thighs, smearing against Xie Qingcheng's perineum.

It was sheer torture.

Xie Qingcheng could honestly say that he wasn't a libidinous person. Before He Yu had successfully trained him, he'd even been rather frigid. But it was different with He Yu—because no matter how little he wanted to admit it, deep down, he still loved him. When they'd been forced to

separate...as the seasons passed in Brooklyn...even during their post-reunion clashes that sent knives into his heart...

He still loved him.

Before He Yu left him, he never realized that the love in his heart was so deep. And he hadn't realized that in the face of He Yu's desire, the reactions that could be elicited in him were far greater than he could comprehend.

Even worse was the depraved dialogue coming from their earbuds. He Yu let out a constant stream of filth as he fucked Xie Qingcheng, the rough kind of dirty talk that only emerged between two men. "Do you have any idea how hot and tight you are back here? And so wet... You're hard in front, too... Xie-ge, it's been a long time since you got off, right? Have you been holding back instead of masturbating? When you're by yourself, do you ever think about how it feels when I fuck you? Do you ever jerk off thinking about us making love?"

After all this time, Xie Qingcheng had long forgotten everything they'd said back then; reliving it now, he felt as if his blood was being heated to a boil, the edges of his ears flushing an alluring, translucent red. Those words had been embarrassing to hear three years ago, and it was even worse now. It was as if the twenty-year-old He Yu was interrogating his present self.

In his head, the young He Yu asked, *Xie Qingcheng, in the three years I wasn't there, did you do it with anyone else? Did you get yourself off? Did you think about me fucking you? Did you come thinking about us?*

Even if He Yu were to ask these questions now, Xie Qingcheng wouldn't answer. But in truth, in the scant handful of times Xie Qingcheng had sought release in the past three years, it was just as the twenty-year-old He Yu said. His desire was only awoken when he thought of He Yu, and it was only thanks to He Yu that he was able to find any miserable relief.

It felt like that past He Yu had seen right through him; as if his deepest secrets had been bared. Xie Qingcheng's inner defenses collapsed even further at the thought—and of course it would be in that very moment that, with how hard and how deep He Yu was thrusting, the tip of his cock accidentally slid past the perineum and roughly prodded against Xie Qingcheng's entrance.

“Ah—!” This shock came without any warning, jarring Xie Qingcheng from his reverie. He let out a low, hoarse cry, body trembling between the sheets.

He Yu was struck frozen.

He’d thought Xie Qingcheng had no desire for him—he understood Xie Qingcheng, after all. Now that Xie Qingcheng and Chen Man had gotten together, there was no way he would have any feelings for anyone else. He never would have expected Xie Qingcheng to get so into having his thighs fucked that he’d moan aloud. He Yu wasn’t sure if he was more excited or distraught.

Given the circumstances, though, he knew he should’ve been distraught. Any excitement was just because he wasn’t exactly a virtuous man. In truth, he deeply believed that Xie Qingcheng was his, and Chen Man was the bastard homewrecker. Even if Xie Qingcheng and Chen Man one day went abroad to be legally married, if he was pushed far enough into madness, He Yu would still trample law and morality alike to fuck Xie Qingcheng day and night behind Chen Man’s back. He’d do it right in front of his nose if it came to it.

But the sound Xie Qingcheng had made gave him pause. Breathing heavily, He Yu kneaded Xie Qingcheng’s ass, then reached in to touch his entrance.

“Don’t...don’t touch there!”

This was the first time tonight that Xie Qingcheng had put up such vigorous resistance. In his confusion, he seemed to have put the mission, the organization, and all else to the back of his mind; instinct took over. He didn’t want He Yu to discover his desire, so he shrank away from He Yu’s exploratory touch.

But the bed was only so large, the space beneath the blankets only so big. He was trapped beneath He Yu with nowhere to flee. He could hear He Yu breathing heavily above him, feel the hot air at the back of his ear.

“Don’t move.”

Wound tight as a spring, eyes red, Xie Qingcheng bit his bottom lip. He could feel He Yu’s fingertip rubbing across his entrance.

He Yu's breathing grew even heavier. "Why are you wet?"

No matter how calm and logical Xie Qingcheng might have been, this crossed the line. He gritted out, "This is a fucking normal physical reaction."

No comment was made on that. He Yu looked at the man beneath him, his thoughts inscrutable. After a long silence, he suddenly flipped Xie Qingcheng over and forced him to look him in the face. He stared into Xie Qingcheng's peach-blossom eyes, then swooped down with no warning to kiss his panting lips. It was a messy and erotic kiss, violent yet affectionate, with too many emotions mixed together and poured all at once into the space between Xie Qingcheng's breaths; a towering tidal wave of desire.

He Yu kissed Xie Qingcheng fiercely while his hands caressed his body, tearing away the rest of his clothes beneath the rumpled sheets. He hoisted up Xie Qingcheng's leg, pushing his huge, hot cock to rub against Xie Qingcheng's soft hole and his taint. The fluid leaking from his tip mixed shamelessly with the dew moistening that little hole, connecting in sticky strings.

"You're hard too..." He Yu rubbed his thigh as he gave Xie Qingcheng's cock a few tugs.

A tremor ran through Xie Qingcheng's body. Rationally speaking, he shouldn't want to sleep with He Yu right now, but rationality would always lose to frantic desire. He was hypnotized by the emotions of their past selves, utterly bewitched, unable to struggle free from the swamp of passion... Or perhaps simply being with He Yu meant that he'd been destined to sink from the start. Perhaps escape had never been in the cards for him.

Rubbing against his lower half, He Yu's upturned head nearly penetrated Xie Qingcheng's quivering, wet hole with each movement. But He Yu had one remaining thread of restraint. He still knew that their goal was just to put on a show for Duan Wen; they'd never been planning to do it for real. So he bit Xie Qingcheng's ear, reciting that classic line that every scumbag boyfriend deployed in bed.

"Don't be afraid, Ge... Relax... I'm just rubbing it on the outside. I won't put it in."

He thrust his hips forward, his burning-hot cock crashing against Xie Qingcheng's hole. The slick tip pressed against an equally slick opening, rubbing against his entrance again and again. Xie Qingcheng's face screwed up tight, his neck arched as his breaths came faster and faster.

This was even worse for him. He wanted He Yu, and the indirect stimulation only added to his torture. He was soon covered in cold sweat, a sickly flush appearing at the corners of his eyes. His entrance involuntarily clenched again and again in a wretched attempt to keep up with He Yu's thrusts.

It was like trying to relieve their thirst with poison, and it was almost too much to bear. He Yu was bewitched by the way Xie Qingcheng's entrance sucked in his head just a little with each thrust; chasing that pleasure, he started moving faster and faster, harder and harder. Suddenly, in a momentary lapse of control, he shoved the entire bulbous head into Xie Qingcheng's hole with an especially wanton thrust.

“Ah...”

The two of them groaned almost in unison, Xie Qingcheng in a mix of pain and pleasure, He Yu in thorough ecstasy. Xie Qingcheng's sweet cavern was sucking in the wild beast of He Yu's desire, and having only the head inside just made the pleasure of penetration even sharper. Rationality urged He Yu to pull out, to not go any further, but love and lust were fighting every second to burn his rationality to ashes.

That, of all times, was when the sex tape reached the part where He Yu was lining up his cock to Xie Qingcheng's hole, and of course he was spewing all kinds of filth as he did. “Do you want it? Can you feel how hot and hard it is? I can make you come again... Just say the word, and I'll push it in and fuck you hard, all the way to your belly...”

He Yu sucked in a deep breath, staring at the man beneath him.

He rocked the head of his cock in and out with shallow thrusts, lingering at Xie Qingcheng's entrance, rubbing wetly at it as he held onto his last teetering shreds of reason. “Ge...” he rasped, “you're gorgeous... I can't bear it... I...I'll just put the tip in. I'm not gonna use the whole thing, okay?”

It was even raunchier than what he'd said three years ago. But Xie Qingcheng wasn't afforded the time to think—He Yu immediately began to fuck him even more wantonly than before. He squeezed the swollen head of his cock into Xie Qingcheng's pulsing hole, rubbing just inside the entrance before pulling out with a pop. Trailing strands of slick, he roughly shoved it back in to enjoy the way that greedy little hole sucked at him so insatiably.

It felt better and better, and He Yu moved faster and faster, hips rocking forward as the mattress bounced and swayed beneath them. If Duan Wen glanced at the monitor right now, there wouldn't be a single doubt left in his mind—there was no way they were faking anything.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't take it; it was too much for him.

He didn't have much of a libido, but He Yu had trained him well. His body remembered He Yu's touch and his ardor, and in comparison he could count on one hand the number of times he found release on his own in the past three years. Being fucked halfway like this made the long-dormant desire inside him rise like a ship riding the rising waters of a flood, spilling out as the slick pouring from his entrance.

Even more frightening were the side effects of Case No. 2's serum. It inflicted upon him a number of her pregnancy symptoms, and pregnancy often made women's bodies more sensitive. The increased sensitivity hit Xie Qingcheng in spades; He Yu's half thrusting, half teasing motions made him shake all over and clench down even harder. He was losing his mind. All the while, the sounds in their earbuds didn't stop. Instead they grew wilder and wilder as their past selves edged closer to climax. The sounds of wet squelching and the slap of skin against skin came in an endless stream of aphrodisiac, subliminally luring the two of them down deeper into the abyss of passion.

He Yu could control himself no longer. He could feel Xie Qingcheng's desire, and Xie Qingcheng's reactions were a relief to him—fucking him wasn't strictly off the table. So long as he didn't go as far over the line as he had before, maybe he could *just*...

His capacity for coherent thought melted away in the boiling desire between them. The young man who'd claimed he was "only going to rub on the outside" moved more and more urgently, hips snapping forward like a pile driver. And at a certain critical point—

“Ah!” Xie Qingcheng’s whole body tensed and he cried out in despair. “He Yu, you...”

He Yu froze entirely. Sprawled out over Xie Qingcheng’s body, he panted for breath, a heavy haze of lust fogging his eyes. With Xie Qingcheng’s legs spread wide open and looped around the taut arc of his waist, during his increasingly wet and wanton thrusts, He Yu had finally fucked open Xie Qingcheng’s hole entirely. Once the head was in, the force he put behind that thrust had sent the rest in over halfway all at once.

“Take it out... Get out... Ah!”

Face screwed tight with strain, He Yu sucked in one gulp of air after another, but he didn’t pull out. He had been trying so hard to resist, and now he’d accidentally lost his head and plunged in halfway. Xie Qingcheng’s insides felt hotter and wetter than any other time before. He was on the brink of madness. How could he resist? After a pause, he pushed the full length of his thick, hard shaft inside.

“Ahh!” Xie Qingcheng tore at the sheets, letting out a shattered, hoarse scream. To the sound of this mournful wail, He Yu shoved himself in all the way in, squeezing out a gush of slick that dripped onto the sheets.

“Ge...I’m sorry,” the young man groaned, filled with so much pleasure that he tingled all over from head to toe. As he voiced his apologies, though, he shoved his cock into Xie Qingcheng’s body even harder, as if he wanted to push his balls in too. He enjoyed the maddening pleasure and the way Xie Qingcheng convulsed around his length, welcoming him in despite the front of resistance.

It was too hot... The false physiological reaction of the blood serum made Xie Qingcheng’s insides hotter and tighter than usual, as if he really were pregnant. He Yu had to pant for breath for a while before he could speak again. “I’m sorry, I...I put the whole thing in... Just let me fuck you, please... I won’t come inside... Is that okay?”

He couldn’t resist for any longer than the time it took him to get those words out. Lifting Xie Qingcheng’s legs, he thrust vigorously in and out of his sopping asshole. For a time, the sound coming through their earbuds seemed to fade away as reality became more passionate than memory.

He Yu knew Xie Qingcheng's body better than anyone else. He knew how to bring pleasure to Xie Qingcheng as swiftly as possible; he knew Xie Qingcheng's sensitive spots and the pace he preferred. He fucked him zealously, feeling Xie Qingcheng grow tighter and tighter around his cock as his pleasure racketed upward at breakneck speed. Every time he pulled out, the opening would cling to him in infatuation, and each time he thrust inside, it would tremble, unable to bear it.

An endless stream of hot, sticky fluids dripped onto the sheets. Fucked so intensely, Xie Qingcheng tried to grab the pillows above his head to disperse some of this terrifying pleasure. But his hand barely made it out from under the blankets before He Yu grabbed it. He pressed Xie Qingcheng's fingers into the sheets, feeling the well-defined bones beneath his palm, as if he never wanted Xie Qingcheng to escape from him so long as he was alive. He slammed into him, fucked him, *had* him, their tightly interlocked hands rubbing back and forth across each other as they swayed with the movements of his hips.

"You're so tight, so hot inside...Xie Qingcheng..." He Yu murmured to the man beneath him amid the storm of passion. "You're sucking me in... It's just so good...Ge..." He fucked him hard, skin slapping against skin as if he was whipping him, flogging him, punishing him...and yet also as if he was seeking his own salvation.

In his craze, he leaned in to kiss Xie Qingcheng, roughly shoving his tongue into his mouth and willfully snatching up his every broken gasp and hurried pant. They kissed furiously, while down below the thrusts grew ever hotter and wilder. "You're so sensitive, Xie Qingcheng," He Yu panted into Xie Qingcheng's mouth as he fucked him. "You're really...you're really... It's like you're pregnant..."

Xie Qingcheng's body abruptly jerked. He didn't know if He Yu was just spouting nonsense or if he had actually noticed the side effects of the serum from Case No. 2, but his heart was so filled with turmoil that he couldn't bear it. Xie Qingcheng couldn't stop himself from crying out, "Ah... He Yu...slow down... *Aah*... Not that hard, it hurts..."

He Yu just panted, bending down to bite Xie Qingcheng's chest in his pleasure. Xie Qingcheng screamed, his body arching up—only to offer his nipples right to He Yu's teeth.

He Yu's excitement grew. Sucking and nibbling on one nipple, he turned his eyes upward to look at Xie Qingcheng's broken expression in the darkness. Aiming for the spot that made Xie Qingcheng tremble uncontrollably, he murmured around his mouthful, "You know...the first time I saw you after I was back in the country, standing there with Xie Xue's child...I wanted to peel off your clothes, shove you against the wall in that hallway, and start fucking you in front of that clueless little brat. I'd fuck you from behind until you were too weak to stand, until you couldn't even hold a child, then I'd shove you down on the floor, spread your legs, and pump you full of come like you were my wife. I'd suck on your tits... bite your nipples..."

Perhaps because he couldn't be too rough right now, having to take care for Xie Qingcheng's health, He Yu vented all of his darker instincts in his words. As he came up with more and more absurd notions, Xie Qingcheng could almost see the ridiculous, erotic scenario he was so vividly describing. He was an absolute wreck. He shook his head, the false physiological reaction making him subconsciously cover his stomach—the protective instinct of a pregnant woman. "Don't...you fucking... It's too deep... Don't push inside any more...*ah!* He Yu...no more...no..."

The only answer he received was even more furious thrusting. He Yu sucked on his swollen, reddish-purple nipple, holding it in his mouth and slurping hard.

"Ah...*ahh!*" Xie Qingcheng arched his neck, completely out of control as he let out a scream.

He Yu paused with a start. He loosened his jaw a little, looking at the man arching his slender neck and clutching at the bedsheets beneath him. Xie Qingcheng was trembling all over, but what shocked He Yu was the faint taste of blood and...

His eyes slid away from the man's bewitching face, down, down to the abused nipple whose skin he'd nearly broken with his teeth. The pale rosehip dripped crimson blood, but mixed with that trembling droplet of red was a pitiful streak of white, slowly sliding down his chest. He Yu's eyes went wide. Even his cock, still inside Xie Qingcheng's warm hole, pulsed in excitement. He ran his tongue over the inside of his mouth, savoring the milky fragrance lurking beneath the iron tang of blood.

“This... What is this...?” His pupils contracted into pinpricks as he stared at the milk and blood running down Xie Qingcheng’s chest. He couldn’t stop himself from fucking into him even faster and harder, like some sort of interrogation torture. “What is this... Why would you...be doing this here?”

Xie Qingcheng lifted an arm, trying to cover the shattered look in his eyes, but He Yu dragged his arm back down. He greedily sucked at Xie Qingcheng’s nipple, lapping over it with his tongue, sucking up blood and milk with equal hunger. His hips jerked more and more, as if he wanted to fuck Xie Qingcheng to death on this bed.

“Ge, how is this possible? Why are you leaking this stuff?”

Under the onslaught of fucking, Xie Qingcheng could scarcely breathe. His chest itched and stung, but no matter what he did, he couldn’t escape He Yu’s searching tongue. Utterly broken, he tried to shove him away. “Let go... It’s a side effect of the blood serum... It’s a side effect of the blood serum, okay? Stop licking there... Ah...”

His neck arched back like a dying swan’s, his pupils expanding and contracting. Tears flowed down his cheeks. “I can’t...” he whined under his breath, but his entire body still shivered when He Yu started hammering his most sensitive spot again, hard and fast. Xie Qingcheng could feel He Yu’s cock pulsing inside him. They’d been fucking intensely for nearly an hour, but now he knew He Yu was about to come.

Xie Qingcheng panted, dragging himself back from the wreck he’d been reduced to by the realization he was leaking milk. “Get out... He Yu, get out...”

He Yu was already out of his mind with lust for Xie Qingcheng. How could he stop now? A light was brimming behind his eyes. Lips stained with Xie Qingcheng’s blood and milk, he rammed the wrecked man in his arms, muttering, “Just a little longer, baby. I’ll pull out before I come.”



He thrust even harder, each one slamming against Xie Qingcheng's weakest spot, forcing Xie Qingcheng to clench around him again and again. Even more slick dripped lasciviously onto the bed. Xie Qingcheng let out a muffled moan, one all but repressed to the barest wisp of sound, slammed out of him in bits and pieces by He Yu's thrusts.

Inside him, he could feel He Yu's cock growing hot and hard, pulsing more and more distinctly by the second. Remembering that He Yu said he would pull out, he spoke up again, his voice tinged with fear and pleading. "Stop... Don't... Ah... Stop it, get out... You... Get out now...*ah!*"

The only response he got was He Yu fucking him even harder in his fervor, as if he wanted to shatter Xie Qingcheng beneath him. The friction and pleasure unlocked the dam of He Yu's desire in an instant.

He didn't pull out; he didn't have the time to. After one more deep, heavy thrust, he suddenly dropped all his weight onto Xie Qingcheng like a male beast mid-orgasm, refusing to let its mate escape out of sheer instinct. He bit down on Xie Qingcheng's nipple again, suckling it with a rough tongue, gulping down the blood and milk that leaked out as his hips jerked into the depths of Xie Qingcheng's hole. He panted as he violently ejaculated spurt after spurt of come.

Unable to stop himself, Xie Qingcheng wailed out loud in despair, shaking from head to toe beneath He Yu. "Ah...ah... You lied to me... He Yu...you liar... Ahhh—! Stop coming... I'm begging you... Don't...ah...*ahh!*"

"I'm sorry...Ge... I couldn't help it... I had no time, it was just too good..."

"Ahh...don't... Stop coming...ah...ah..." Xie Qingcheng had never been this weak or this sensitive. He instinctively covered his belly, tears rolling down his cheeks, body wound so tight his toes went white from the strain. His voice was practically a sob. "Stop coming... Save me... I can't... He Yu... Ah... He Yu..."

"I'm here...I'm right here." He Yu kissed him, comforted him, so gentle yet so cruel. Besotted and panting, he held one of Xie Qingcheng's sweat-damp hands, interlocking his fingers with his. "I'm the one fucking

you. Don't be afraid... Ge...it'll be better in a moment... It'll feel so good... I'll make you feel so good..."

He held the trembling man, coming inside him in vigorous spurts as he rammed Xie Qingcheng's sensitive prostate. Xie Qingcheng nearly spasmed in He Yu's arms when he finally came too.

"Ahh!"

"You came too. Does that feel good? Was it good for you?" By the end of it, He Yu's eyebrows furrowed and he let out a muffled groan. The way Xie Qingcheng's insides contracted when he came was exactly like a pregnant woman's sensitive cunt violently squeezing He Yu's dick, sending an electric shock up his abdomen followed by wave after wave of tingling.

The two of them collapsed between the sheets, both panting for breath.

After all that time, the swaying of the bed and blankets finally slowed to a stop. The video on He Yu's phone had long since played to its end, but neither of them had noticed. Under the cover of the blankets, He Yu kissed Xie Qingcheng's moist lips again, besotted, lingering, yet with an obligatory restraint as he kissed and sucked on them.

He no longer dared to say "I love you." He could only give Xie Qingcheng this endless kiss, as if by doing so he might communicate directly to his heart the emotions he couldn't speak.

"Was it good like that?" In the aftermath, He Yu steadied his breathing, holding the sweat-soaked man and stroking his trembling waist, his abdomen, the apex of his chest. "Did you like that?"

Xie Qingcheng's throat was hoarse. His eyes were red and damp. The only thing he said was "...Hurry up and get out."

He Yu knew this would be the only time they could do it tonight. Xie Qingcheng was in a bad state, and he couldn't take any more of this torment. After one more wet and messy kiss, he reluctantly pulled his cock from Xie Qingcheng's hole, despite it already beginning to perk up again. They came free from each other with a slight pop. Xie Qingcheng immediately felt a gush of warm, sticky fluids from his lower half, his own bodily fluids mixed with He Yu's come...

He didn't know how things had gotten to this stage yet again. Xie Qingcheng bonelessly plucked out the earbud and covered his trembling lashes with one arm. How had he...yet again...

Before he could finish the thought, He Yu was looming over him again, warm, wet lips pressed to Xie Qingcheng's ear. "Relax... It's all right. I'll take you to get cleaned up."

Maybe it was Xie Qingcheng's imagination, but he thought he heard another word half swallowed after He Yu's "relax." It almost sounded like a term of address he hadn't heard in a long, long time.

"Xie-ge."

Chapter 222: But We Ended up Doing It for Real

ONCE THEY WERE ALL FINISHED UP, Xie Qingcheng didn't let He Yu carry him to the bathroom. No matter how weak he was, surely he still had the strength to get out of bed and walk a few steps. But the bed was on the high side, and when Xie Qingcheng pulled on a bathrobe and tried to step down off it, he lost his footing and toppled forward—but He Yu caught him.

“...Let me help you.”

The snowy-white bathrobe hid the marks blotting Xie Qingcheng's body. He felt terribly awkward now that He Yu knew about the blood serum's aftereffects, and, despite his masculinity, he was basically fleeing the scene.

“It's fine, I can walk myself.”

There was a large whirlpool bathtub in the bathroom. The high-tech tub filled quickly, and Xie Qingcheng drew the curtain and hung his bathrobe over the rack, sinking exhausted into the steaming water. He Yu had told him how the cameras in the bathroom were angled, so he knew that once the curtains were closed, they couldn't get a good look at what was happening in the tub. He could at least take a bath in peace.

He enjoyed a hot bath. Even though he knew he needed to clean up, right now he only wanted to soak a little and regather some of his shattered strength. He had a proper headache; he had never met a person whose promises meant so little. In his opinion, men should take responsibility for their words in these kinds of situations. He, for example, had always taken responsibility in the past. He did whatever he said he'd do, and whenever his wife asked for this or that, he would give it some rational consideration before saying it was no good and patiently explaining why.

But He Yu was nothing like that. Any promise He Yu made in bed could be overturned the next second. There wasn't a trustworthy bone in his

body; he'd take a mile before you even gave him an inch. Meanwhile, Xie Qingcheng had no way to hold him to his word.

He lifted a scoop of water and rinsed his face. Water ran down his dark brows and dripped back into the tub, sending out rings of ripples.

Complicated feelings about what had just transpired whirled around in his head. Forget the side effects of Case No. 2's blood serum for the moment—Xie Qingcheng actually cared quite a lot about that part about Xie Lishen. Xie Lishen had spoken of many private things that had happened between him and He Yu, which aside from the two of them, no other person could have known. Xie Lishen citing all those details so accurately was one of the things that hurt him the most deeply; but now, He Yu said he hadn't told him.

Even though he didn't know exactly what was going on, if He Yu said he hadn't done it, he was willing to believe that Xie Lishen had used some sort of subterfuge to learn everything he knew. And Xie Qingcheng didn't want to inquire into it any further. The mere thought of Xie Lishen's name disgusted him, and he knew He Yu didn't like talking about him either.

It wasn't as if Xie Qingcheng had been able to confront He Yu before, and now he had his explicit denial. Between He Yu and Xie Lishen, there was no question of whom he would rather trust. But...

As he thought over He Yu's affectionate actions, he didn't know if what he saw was reality or an illusion, one borne of his excessive desire for He Yu to return to the way he was before. After all, He Yu had called him old and crippled with his own mouth. When Xie Lishen said those things, Xie Qingcheng didn't give a damn. He had total confidence in his own appearance—in his opinion, he was handsome as hell.

But He Yu's words were harder to forget.

There was a mirrored wall next to the tub. Xie Qingcheng wiped off a swath of condensation, staring at his face in the reflection.

A sickly complexion, an unfocused left eye; white hairs stood out amid the black without his needing to search for them. He didn't care about appearances, and he'd used to be highly confident in himself. But with that layer of self-confidence peeled away, the simple truth was that he *was* now

old and crippled. Having been a doctor for so many years, he knew that in the end, one simply had to accept the facts of life—aging, illness, and death.

He sighed and closed his eyes. He thought He Yu had done well to get so into it with this version of him for the sake of the mission. Though he was no longer as handsome as in his golden days, He Yu had given him plenty of face.

His original wish had been only that He Yu could set aside his hatred; he hadn't dreamt of any more than that. But He Yu had put on such a good show that it placed a faint hope, one that shouldn't have existed, in his wizened heart.

The heat of the bath soon blurred the mirror again, and the sight of that sallow face was swallowed by condensation.

Forget it... A clear mind was a man's greatest virtue. After all the ways He Yu had been hurt, with how much he had hated him, he ought to be satisfied with He Yu treating him with equanimity and even comforting him with a word or two. He'd overheard the students at the university talking about how so many mediocre men acted like egomaniacs, and he didn't want to be an egomaniac. An excess of self-confidence wasn't a good thing—especially around a person he had hurt, and who had hurt him in turn.

What they had now was good enough. There were some things that, if not said outright, could keep up the delusions you had about them your heart. Some dreams were best never woken up from.

As he soaked, there was a soft clatter. He Yu pulled the curtain aside and looked down at him from beneath the night-sky-patterned ceiling of the bathroom.

Xie Qingcheng blinked his eyes open, wholly exhausted. "Hm? What is it?"

He Yu didn't speak. He stripped off the bathrobe haphazardly covering his body and waded into the deep end of the whirlpool tub. With an entire additional adult man in the tub, the water level surged to above their chests. Xie Qingcheng's heart ached from the pressure. He Yu moved over, meeting Xie Qingcheng's lazy gaze.

The bathroom was dim. With one hand against the black marble tub wall, He Yu let the other float atop the warm water. His legs brushed against Xie Qingcheng's beneath the surface, his lips nearly touching Xie Qingcheng's. Quietly, he said, "I was worried you weren't feeling well, so I came to help you."

Looking into the young man's eyes, Xie Qingcheng sighed to himself. So He Yu had grown up; he'd learned that he should care for how his partner was feeling after the fact. "...I'm fine."

"It's dark in here. Can you see?"

He had a point. The room was excessively large, and the interior designer had used a lot of black. The dark color constricted the appearance of the space, giving the whole thing a very elegant, high-tech look. All the tiles were black, and the ceiling-mounted lighting, arranged in pinpricks like a starry night sky, wasn't very bright. Xie Qingcheng leaned against the side of the tub, his pale skin practically the color of fresh snow against the black jade-like luster of the rim.

"It's fine, I can see," he said.

There was a moment of quiet from He Yu. "...Is there anything you want to say to me?"

He seemed almost expectant, but what was he waiting for? Xie Qingcheng put his powerful STEM brain to work pondering the question. Thinking of his sickly appearance and his blind eye, and He Yu's dedication and sacrifice, he finally got it. "Good work today," he said.

"Ah..."

He Yu didn't seem to react. Xie Qingcheng repeated himself. "You've worked hard today."

He Yu wasn't sure what to say. "You... Yet again, you pull up your pants and...and..."

He trailed off as he realized that this time, Xie Qingcheng hadn't even fucking gotten around to pulling up his pants. He'd turned it around on him the second they were done. But Xie Qingcheng had always done this—He Yu had plenty of experience with this kind of thing. Trying to calm

down, he thought to himself, *Don't lose control, don't lose control, you should be used to this by now.*

Xie Qingcheng tilted back his head as steam rose from the tub, softening his handsome yet sallow face. Seeing He Yu unhappy either way, he sighed at a volume only his bathmate could hear. “Ah, you... Well, what do you want me to say? I...”

Furious, He Yu surged forward and kissed Xie Qingcheng, stopping his tongue before he could say any more. He kissed him hard enough to shut him up for a long while. Xie Qingcheng was befuddled—why did they need to add another scene after their act was done? But he indulged He Yu, too tired to bother struggling. He let his arm rest over the edge of the tub in a lazy, self-defeating manner, letting He Yu hold him and kiss him as deeply as he wished.

When the lingering kiss finished at last, He Yu lifted his eyes, lips wet, body half submerged and bent forward like a creature emerging from the water. From this position, he could only look up at Xie Qingcheng. He stared into his eyes as Xie Qingcheng looked down from above, like a sickly human prince watching a merman appear before him.

“My turn to ask a question,” said He Yu. He locked gazes with Xie Qingcheng. “The things we did tonight,” he began. “Do you regret them?”

How was Xie Qingcheng supposed to answer that? He didn't regret it, but he was a little at a loss. He had no idea how long it would take him to get over this after the mission ended and they didn't have to do these things anymore. Maybe he never would get over it—but that was his own business. He wasn't accustomed to inflicting his own worries on other people, let alone someone like He Yu, who had given his own life for him.

“Will you regret it?” He Yu pressed.

Xie Qingcheng watched him quietly for a while. In the end, he stroked He Yu's hair and said, “It's too late. Go to sleep.”

Slowly, slowly, He Yu's eyes went dim again.

As he rested his eyes for a moment, Xie Qingcheng heard the water slosh again. But he opened them to find that He Yu still hadn't left. “What is it?” he asked. “Is there something else?”

There was something He Yu had intended to ask from the start, something he was debating whether or not he should say. Out of other questions, he finally shifted his gaze down to the bloodstain on Xie Qingcheng's chest. "Also..."

"Hm?"

"Is... Are you...are you okay there?"

He really had to pick the worst thing to ask about.

Xie Qingcheng's manly awkwardness returned, and his face grew dark. Finding this utterly shameful, he pushed He Yu away so he was no longer floating in front of him and pulled himself up using the edge of the tub. "I'm fine." Getting up was clearly uncomfortable for him, but physical discomfort was nothing compared to psychological humiliation. He didn't even want to clean himself anymore—he just wanted to put his clothes back on and get back in bed. But He Yu caught his arm.

Xie Qingcheng turned his head. "What."

"You should wash up. It'll be hard to find you treatment here if you get sick." He Yu rose. "I'll leave."

He Yu lay back down on the messy bed, alone.

He stared up at the ceiling. The sheets were still filled with the scent of his and Xie Qingcheng's tryst. For a moment, He Yu had felt as if he and Xie Qingcheng had never parted; that those three tumultuous years had never happened. Although they had never really been in mutual love, at least Xie Qingcheng had belonged to him alone. How had he ever been dissatisfied?

After maybe half an hour, Xie Qingcheng finished bathing and finally came back to bed. He smelled faintly of clean body wash, but it couldn't hide the cold, medicinal scent that was soaked into his bones. His movements getting into bed were a bit awkward—after all, He Yu had done a number on him—but he still made it in without making a sound.

He covered his face with the blanket.

Xie Qingcheng's breathing was very shallow as he lay there; now and then it stopped entirely. He Yu knew it was because he was in pain. He

hesitated, then reached out, wanting to rub his waist. But looking at the stiff line of Xie Qingcheng's back, He Yu stopped himself, afraid he'd make him even more upset.

The phone he'd used to play the video had dutifully completed its task, and the battery was completely dead. The space beneath the blankets was filled once more with the dark of a dragon's abyss. He Yu tossed and turned, and no one said anything for a long time, both combing through the twisted, matted mess of their emotions.

In the end, it was Xie Qingcheng who spoke first.

"He Yu."

"Hm?" Immediately He Yu stopped fidgeting. There was still that thin, faint expectation in his tone. As long as Xie Qingcheng quietly admitted that it hurt, he knew, he would willingly ease the physical pain he had caused him.

However, to his surprise... Now that he'd sobered up in the bath and taken a moment of rest, Xie Qingcheng said, "If you're not too tired... continue your previous report. We only have this little bit of time to talk business every day."

He Yu was aghast.

"Go on," Xie Qingcheng urged.

Who would drop such a mood-killing line right after getting intimate? Even a robot couldn't pull this kind of bullshit! Heart surging like the tides, He Yu reached out and pried Xie Qingcheng's face over to look at him. He glared—he couldn't take it. He wanted to spit a furious tirade at Xie Qingcheng, wanted to abandon all sense and bite Xie Qingcheng to death.

But the tirade wouldn't come. He didn't unhinge his jaw. As he glared and glared, the young man's eyes abruptly turned red.

Xie Qingcheng's entire body was aching, especially his chest—which only magnified the shame he felt. He was floored to see this kind of expression on his tormentor's face. "...What is it now?" Xie Qingcheng, stoically enduring the pain that had been inflicted on him, found this utterly unbelievable. What business did He Yu have looking so wronged after the kinds of things he'd just done? As if Xie Qingcheng had bullied *him*?

“...Nothing.” He Yu was just as proud, and he wouldn’t actually be completely shameless in front of Xie Qingcheng. He averted his reddened eyes, sniffed, and said, “I don’t want to explain any more today. I’m tired. I want to sleep.”

“All right. Then sleep,” Xie Qingcheng replied. What kind of temper tantrum was this boy throwing? “You can tell me tomorrow.”

But after glaring at him for a while, He Yu huffed in spite, “I... If you want to talk business, I’ll talk business! Where was I last time?”

“You were telling me why this island resembles Huzhou University’s Neverland.” Xie Qingcheng still didn’t understand He Yu’s reaction, but he didn’t have the strength to investigate the reason. “You said it had to do with a boy on this island,” he added, exhausted.

“Mm...” He Yu lowered his eyes, their rims still red.

“What’s the situation with that boy?”

It felt to He Yu like they were in the fairy tale *The Arabian Nights*—but who knew when the tale would come to an abrupt end. Project Dreambreaker had received their data on the frost laser, and the day of their full-scale attack was bound to be soon. Maybe the final battle would begin before their stories were done.

So he decided to hold onto many of the details and tell Xie Qingcheng the most important parts first.

“He’s not a real boy.”

Xie Qingcheng’s voice was still a little hoarse after their activities. “...Then, he’s transgender?”

“No.” Thinking it over, He Yu decided it would be easier to approach this from a different angle. “As you know, the Mandela Syndicate’s most advanced breakthroughs are in biology. They want to use biological agents and virtual reality to create the Mandelaverse, and they’ve carried out a number of experiments in the process of achieving this. My mother, for example.”

He paused there. “I told you last time that her body is still preserved. The year I was born, Wei Rong...cooperated with the Mandela Syndicate to kill my mother, but they preserved her body and kept it on this island.”

“I wanted to ask about that earlier,” said Xie Qingcheng. “Why did they preserve her body?”

He Yu’s eyes dimmed further. “A transplant.”

“A trans—” Xie Qingcheng understood before he finished answering the question. But the idea forming in his head was so deranged that he couldn’t be sure that what he was imagining was really true.

Seeing through his guess, He Yu confirmed it. “That’s right. It’s exactly what you’re thinking.”

Silence.

“For the metaverse concept I described to you before,” He Yu said, “their final vision is to create a machine that can shatter the wall between the real and virtual world. They want to take the human soul—in other words, to extract consciousness from the physical form—and upload it to the digital cloud. They’ve yet to break the limitations of our era to create a perfect iteration of this machine, but they do already possess a certain medical advancement.”

Another pause. Then, “Brain transplantation. Compared to the metaverse, brain transplantation is a far more ancient idea, a topic of medical discussion within the understanding of mainstream science. Ethical concerns are the only reason no legitimate organization or medical specialist would bring it up as a serious proposal.”

This was well known to Xie Qingcheng. Since the first successful human organ transplants, brain transplantation—despite sounding like a pipe dream—was something many people secretly wished for in the shadows. It was cruel, deranged, and inhumane, but it lured people in like Pandora’s box, coaxing them to crack open the secret door to eternal life.

This revelation was spine-chilling. Xie Qingcheng’s voice dropped even lower. “The Mandela Syndicate can do this now?”

“It’s only a matter of time. There are a number of flaws, and very few hosts that are viable candidates, but—” He Yu sucked in a deep breath. “They’ve already completed two successful experiments.”

All the blood left Xie Qingcheng’s face. A single successful brain transplantation would cause a tsunami in the wider world. This was an era-

defining act of mad science. But the Mandela Syndicate had done it twice, hidden from the world on an unmonitored island in international waters?! He broke out coughing, his body still weakened in the aftermath of their activities.

He Yu froze for a second and patted his back. “You... Are you all right? I may have been a little... And the reaction from that blood serum...”

“I forbid you from mentioning Case No. 2’s blood serum ever again.” Xie Qingcheng’s face was dark. He panted, lightly pushing He Yu’s hand away. “Continue.”

Seeing the humiliated look on his face, He Yu knew that for a man with Xie Qingcheng’s temperament, bringing the side effects up again would only make thing more awkward. He dropped the topic to keep Xie Qingcheng happy. “So, do you remember how I told you that that ‘boy’ is the true leader of this island?”

“I do. You said that forty years ago, the Mandela Syndicate finalized their framework of thought around the metaverse, and that the creator of this system wasn’t Duan Wen, but this boy who rarely shows his face.”

“That’s right. But no child goes forty years without growing,” said He Yu. “So, the ‘boy’ isn’t a real boy. He’s the second successful recipient of the brain transplant—the brains behind the entire organization—Duan Cuizhen.”

The curtains were raised on the shocking truth. Speaking lightly but with careful enunciation, He Yu named the origins of this dark past. “She’s the serial killer who was active forty years ago discovered by Project Dreambreaker, the witch of science, Huizhen.” But Huizhen was just the nickname the police had given this mysterious killer. Just as Jack the Ripper’s real name wasn’t Jack, Huizhen wasn’t hers. Her real name was Duan Cuizhen.

“Her surname is Duan?” This was Xie Qingcheng’s first point of focus amid his spinning thoughts.

“Mm.”

“Then she and Duan Wen...”

“I can’t be certain, but I think Duan Wen is two generations her junior. If the reports I found are true, Duan Cuizhen is ninety years old, an old lady,” He Yu said. “But her current body is that of a boy who died at nine years of age.”

Chapter 223: I Will Protect You

ACCORDING TO HE YU, Duan Cuizhen had been born in the thirties, in the Duan village of Qingli County. She had been an honor student in Huzhou University's chemistry program. She must have had some formative experience on Neverland during her time at school that led her to turn Mandela Island into a larger version of Neverland's image.

Duan Cuizhen was in poor health, and she rarely showed herself to other members of the Mandela Syndicate. She let Duan Wen take care of most matters in her stead, and she never talked about her own past.

"My first time on the island," said He Yu, "I was just like you. I thought Duan Wen was in charge of everything. But eventually, I discovered that compared to Duan Wen, the residents of the island fear 'Great-Grandmother' much more. I've waited for a long time to get a look at this Great-Grandmother's true face, but I've never encountered her. I tried asking about her, but they didn't trust me very much back then—they were controlling me at the same time as they were treating me."

Xie Qingcheng could understand entirely. He Yu had been saved by Duan Wen's organization after he was lost at sea. At the time of the battle, He Yu had pretended he was betraying them for Duan Wen, gaining Duan Wen's trust at the cost of a chip implanted in his own heart. But Duan Wen had found himself suffering a greater betrayal than any he had suffered before, and Mandela Island—undetected for decades—was exposed to the police. He Yu was a sword in the very heart of Mandela's headquarters.

Given the circumstances, refraining from putting He Yu to death was already a kindhearted act in the name of valuing talent on Duan Wen's part. How could he not be on his guard, not restrict him even the slightest bit?

"I spent a long time on the island and offered him a great deal of strategic support before my restrictions here began to lift, before they started seeing me as one of them even halfway," He Yu said. "The ultimate reason Duan Wen was willing to accept me is what happened when he took

me to the underground laboratory beneath their fortress—there, I saw my mother.”

Although Xie Qingcheng was utterly exhausted from the sex, he still listened carefully, gathering his own thoughts as he did. He Yu’s voice was quiet as he guided him through his memories.

“After my mother died, they flash-froze her body in liquid nitrogen and stored her in a special hibernation tank. Twenty years had passed, but she still looked exactly the same as before. Time had stopped completely for her. And I broke when I saw her,” said He Yu.

“Before...I never thought that I could see my mom again, this person who only lived in the descriptions of others, who once loved me, who stubbornly protected me. Looking at her from beyond the tank was a strange feeling. In that moment, it felt like I experienced true kinship for the first time. Though she had already closed her eyes for the final time—she would never look at me, never speak to me—I could immediately envision what she was like when she was alive, even hear her call my name.”

He had to gather his emotions for a moment before he could continue. “I knew this was my mom. My real mom. The one who had protected me with her life.”

If not for Lü Zhishu, Xie Qingcheng couldn’t help but think, and how she had separated mother and son, climbing into the He family’s lives like a cuckoo chick in another family’s nest... If she hadn’t proclaimed herself He Yu’s mother and claimed him as her own for two decades...maybe He Yu would have had a perfect home. His parents would have both loved him, and he would have been able to grow up as happy and healthy as an ordinary boy. Xie Qingcheng coughed lightly. If he felt this much rue as an outsider looking in, he could only imagine what He Yu must have felt looking at Vivian’s body.

“Back then, Duan Wen was standing right beside me, taking in every bit of my reaction,” said He Yu. “He knew I was mired deep in despair. I was sick. I was injured. I had clawed my way back into the land of the living, but I didn’t have anything to live for. Then, he showed me my mom...sleeping, right there, and he asked me, ‘Do you want your mother to wake up and return to your side?’”

Xie Qingcheng’s gaze was shadowed. “But she was already...”

“I know.” He Yu didn’t let Xie Qingcheng finish. “I know she’s already gone. But I have to admit that the blueprints Duan Wen showed me were tempting. He told me about Mandela’s metaverse plan, explained the concept of separating thought from physical form. He said they had preserved Vivian’s body because she was a host well-suited to their organization’s specifications. They analyzed her genes and determined that she had a rare constitution that was perfect for the needs of their research, and that was the reason they’d perfectly preserved her body for all these years, at great expense. Once Mandela’s technology matured, her body and her brain would be reawakened,” He Yu said. “My mom would come back to life.”

The concept of flash-freezing a person in liquid nitrogen to be awoken later wasn’t a unique invention of the Mandela Syndicate. Various organizations had been offering such a service for a long time, at a steep price—they would rapidly lower the temperature of their clients’ bodies soon after death to keep them perfectly preserved until the day that science could wake them up again, offering people who didn’t want to face their own deaths a thread of hope. But the technology was controversial; a substantial contingent of its opponents, including a number of experts in related fields, believed that reviving the dead was absolutely impossible.

“Did you believe him?” Xie Qingcheng asked.

“I was certainly moved. If you saw her body, you’d hesitate as well. She looked like she was only asleep,” said He Yu. “And my reaction was exactly what Duan Wen and his people wanted to see. Back then, I didn’t have a full understanding of Mandela’s technical capabilities. I said to Duan Wen, forget reviving a dead person frozen in liquid nitrogen, we haven’t even seen a successful case of brain transplantation yet. How long would I have to wait?”

“What did Duan Wen say?”

“Duan Wen said nothing at all. After I asked the question, I heard a pair of high heels clicking against the ground behind me. I thought it was just another employee of the lab, but when my eyes followed the sound, that was when I saw ‘him’ for the first time.”

“Who?”

“A little boy, eight or nine years old. I had never seen such a strange child before. He was wearing a tailored little wine-red suit and a pair of women’s high heels and looking at me with the ghost of a smile on his face. His eyes were just like a ninety-year-old woman’s. I asked who he was, and Duan Wen told me that he was living proof of Mandela’s technological capabilities, likely the only successful recipient of a brain transplant in the world.” He paused. “That was when I found out that this boy was the ‘Great-Grandmother’ everyone spoke of.”

Goosebumps broke out across Xie Qingcheng’s skin beneath the warm blankets. “So, Duan Cuizhen had her brain transplanted into a little boy’s body?”

“That’s right,” said He Yu. “Just like they said, Duan Cuizhen underwent brain transplant surgery and came back to life in a new body. This wasn’t even her first surgery,” he explained. “At the time, I knew he was a brain transplant recipient, and the leader of the island. But I didn’t know his true identity before the surgery, that he was the Huizhen who was profiled by the police. I knew he was the key to all of it, so I’d been investigating him in secret the whole time. I finally discovered the whole truth just a little while ago—that he was Huizhen, also known as Duan Cuizhen.

“From what I found, the original Duan Cuizhen suffered radiation poisoning in the laboratory and developed cancer. In the 2000s, her body was already giving out. She didn’t want to submit to death, so she had another scientist on the island perform an insane first brain transplant surgery on her. The surgery was easy enough, but finding a host was harder. Duan Cuizhen had her people test a number of samples, but the projected chances of success were all very low. Until someone found her elder sister in Duan Village—her half sister with whom she shared a father. Her sister was in her seventies, and she was in poor health. She had spent her whole life in Qingli County. We’ve been there before—do you remember Lu Yuzhu’s daughter, Yi A-Wen?”

“I do.” Xie Qingcheng frowned. “I remember we met a woman who looked very much like Lu Yuzhu in Qingli County, and she delivered us the school files we were searching for. She was...”

“Duan Wen sent her. The whole plot was to make use of us to eliminate Huang Zhilong for him. I learned that woman’s whole story; I’ll tell you later.” He Yu continued laying out the case of Duan Cuizhen. “A few decades before our investigation, Qingli County was even more isolated and backward than it is now, and its residents behaved even more preposterously. Duan Cuizhen’s sister had been married to two men, one after the other, and given birth to six children. But only one boy had survived. That boy later picked up a common bad habit among the men of Qingli County—gambling. After he gambled away all his money, he forced his wife and aging mother to sell themselves... It’s absurd, but it’s true.

“By the time Duan Cuizhen found her sister, her son had been hacked to death for failing to pay his debts and her daughter-in-law had passed away a few years before. She had no other family and was ridden with illness, her skin sagging, lower body stinking of gynecological infections... You can imagine how disappointed Duan Cuizhen was to learn that this was the only host with a compatibility of over ninety percent.”

He Yu shifted, smoothing the blanket above them. “But she had no better choice. Her sister was the only potential host she’d found in a decade, and her cancer was steadily advancing. In the end, she had to accept her fate and have her researchers transplant her brain into her sister’s body.”

“Then, her sister—”

“They plucked her brain out. They killed her.”

Xie Qingcheng was silent.

“Duan Cuizhen felt nothing for her sister; they hadn’t grown up together,” said He Yu. “And there’s no humanity in that woman. Taking the life of a seventy-year-old lady was no more difficult than slaughtering a chicken for her. She used her sister’s body to grasp a last chance at survival by putting herself on the brink of death. In the end, the experiment worked. She succeeded. It was the first successful case of brain transplantation that we know of. Duan Cuizhen abandoned her body, one wracked by late-stage cancer, and found new life in her sister’s flesh. She was overjoyed, but she was far from satisfied.”

Disbelief flooded Xie Qingcheng. “She wasn’t satisfied?”

“Far from it. Don’t forget, her sister was even older than she was, and had all kinds of awful diseases. The medical facilities on the island could treat those diseases, even cure them entirely, but it must have been torture to Duan Cuizhen. Her first brain transplant was a success, so she began to wonder, when could she do it a second time? If she could transplant herself into her sister’s body, surely one day she could solve the medical hurdles preventing her from transplanting her brain into a younger, healthier body in which she could properly enjoy her life.”

He Yu paused for a moment. “She sought genetic samples from everywhere, seeking suitable hosts for her second surgery. And then...” His eyes dimmed. “My mother caught her eye.”

Xie Qingcheng looked shocked.

“That’s right,” said He Yu, voice cold. “Duan Wen told me they’d only discovered my mother’s genes were special after her death. They were lying. It was only because they knew about her rare constitution that they’d plotted to kill her! Duan Cuizhen needed my mother’s body... By her calculations, although my mother had no blood relation with her, her genes were well suited. Their compatibility was over seventy percent.”

Xie Qingcheng could never have imagined something like this. He felt as if he had been thrown into an ice-choked river, and another fit of coughing overtook him. “So...” He sucked in a breath. “Duan Cuizhen wanted to take your mother’s life first, and luring Wei Rong into plotting against her came after?”

“That’s right. Wei Rong didn’t come up with that plot on her own. Duan Cuizhen encouraged her. But neither of them are innocent. Both wanted my mother to die.” He Yu’s voice was wooden. “Without Duan Cuizhen, Wei Rong would have found some other way to harm her. Without Wei Rong, Duan Cuizhen still would have plotted to take her life. It’s just that the two of them joined forces right off the bat. Wei Rong wasn’t as intelligent as Duan Cuizhen, so she became her tool.”

A spine-chilling truth: All of it had been planned from the start. But

“The organization killed your mother,” Xie Qingcheng pointed out. “How could Duan Cuizhen believe you would actually help her?”

“She never believed I was wholeheartedly on her side,” He Yu said. “Nor did Duan Wen. But, both of them think I have no other choice. Back then, I had nothing. I... After that battle at sea, there was nothing left for me.”

At those words, Xie Qingcheng’s face paled. *Do not betray the trust of others; human lives come above all else*—these were the two tenets he had violated with He Yu. Even if He Yu let bygones be bygones, he couldn’t escape his guilt at the mention of it.

But He Yu was too deeply invested in his story to notice he’d touched a sore spot for Xie Qingcheng. “I was so lonely,” he went on, his expression turning a little sickly. “Even Duan Wen could tell. On one side was despair, and on the other was a chance of my mother coming back to life. If she could come back to me, I wouldn’t be lonely anymore; I would have a new life, a family.” His voice was practically a sigh. “This was the promise they made me. They promised me that as long as I cooperated, the Mandela Syndicate would save my mother. They didn’t think I had any better choice.”

“But...” Xie Qingcheng’s voice was quiet. “Didn’t Duan Cuizhen kill your mother to transplant herself into her body? If she revived your mother, wouldn’t it all have been for naught?”

“She did indeed once want to transplant herself into my mother’s body. But there was a certain discovery made that caused her to give up on this plan. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have appeared before me as a little boy; she would have simply used my mother’s body for her second transplant.”

This was a riddle indeed. After her first successful operation two decades ago, Duan Cuizhen had searched everywhere for spare bodies, and ultimately colluded with Wei Rong to murder Vivian. She absolutely could have used Vivian’s body for her second transplant, but she had not. Instead, she only preserved it. By the time her first transplant body was giving out, she still hadn’t used the body she had gone to such efforts to obtain, choosing to use a nine-year-old boy instead. There must have been some reason.

“What happened?”

“Rejection derangement,” said He Yu.

Any normal organ transplant could result in rejection, and obviously the reaction to a brain transplant would be even more severe. A couple of years after Duan Cuizhen's successful surgery, at nearly the same time she plotted to have Vivian killed, this reaction occurred.

"Mandela calls the rejection of a brain transplant 'rejection derangement' because in addition to the usual rejection symptoms, there are some symptoms unique to brain transplants," He Yu explained. "Because the surgery preserves some of the host's nervous tissue, after the brain transplant, Duan Cuizhen developed a number of psychological issues. She never told us the details, but from the way she acted, she must have been in a lot of pain. Pain almost beyond what she could endure. And the lower the compatibility, the more severe the rejection reaction would be. Duan Cuizhen was already going through torture in her sister's body, which had a compatibility of over ninety percent. She began to fear my mother's mere seventy percent compatibility."

"She knew she wouldn't be able to take it," said Xie Qingcheng.

"That's right."

"Then that boy..."

"The boy is her great-grandnephew."

"You said that Duan Wen is two generations her junior."

"Mm," said He Yu. "That's a guess, because I once heard Duan Cuizhen discuss her genetic compatibility with Duan Wen, and it was around sixty percent. In most cases, that means blood relations. But sixty percent was too low, or else she wouldn't have spared him. That boy was from her sister's side of the family, an abandoned child. She went to great efforts to find him. His genetic compatibility was eighty-five percent, just barely enough to satisfy her. So when her first transplant body gave out, she didn't use my mother's, but conservatively chose her great-grandnephew instead...thus completing her second brain transplant."

All was silent for a while.

"She killed her sister, then killed her nephew?"

"Yes. She would do anything for her goal. As far as she's concerned, once her metaverse plans are complete, there's nothing in this world that

can't be replaced or recreated. She could use the metaverse to create a new digital sister, a new nephew... Along this long and winding path, she won't spare a single human life. But still, she remained unsatisfied."

"What reason does she have to be unsatisfied? A nine-year-old child. It's enough for her to live a second lifetime!"

"Rejection derangement," He Yu whispered. "It hurts so badly that I hear that sometimes she feels that she might as well be dead. And she doesn't like being in a male body. She wants to overcome the limits of genetic compatibility, wants to fully relieve the pain of being unable to adapt to a new body. She wants release."

"It might be an impossible task to anyone else, but she's been sending people to collect case files and the most cutting-edge research results from every corner of the world for a long time. She's recruited researchers from that lab in America developing RN-13. She staged a death to make everyone think one of the researchers was gone, but it's all fake. He became her underling, and she had him invent a stronger version of RN-13... Duan Cuizhen thinks there's nothing in the biomedical field she can't conquer. Since her first rejection reaction, she's been working tirelessly to find a perfect solution for going on twenty years now."

He Yu paused there, his breath hovering around Xie Qingcheng's face. Looking into his eyes, he knew that Xie Qingcheng had guessed some of what he had yet to say.

As he expected, Xie Qingcheng whispered, "She found a way, right?"

"...That's right. You understand."

An unmatched adaptive ability, able to tolerate blood serums and transplants no one else could, able to adapt to experiments no one else could cope with...

"She's looking for the First Emperor."

"Yes." He Yu said, "If she gets her hands on the First Emperor's dossier, she could in theory transplant herself into anyone's body. That data could solve many of the problems she's encountered on the road to eternal life—could give her unlimited freedom in selecting a host."

He laid one hand on Xie Qingcheng's cool cheek. The space beneath the blanket was their intimate retreat, the place where they could share their secrets, the den in which they could nest. The world was vast, and they had naught but this little bed. It was only under the covers that they could face each other with no disguise.

He Yu dropped his voice to the level of a mosquito's buzz. "This is why she must never find out your secret. They deceived Project Dreambreaker with virtual reality, but she's also been deceived by Professor Qin's lie. She always believed the First Emperor was a data file. That's why she sent people to your home to ransack those notes... If she knew that a person like you existed in the world..." His voice dropped even lower, becoming nearly inaudible. "Pandora's box would open for real. For as long as I'm here, I'll never let her find you."

He Yu's fingertip stroked down Xie Qingcheng's face. "No matter what happened between us, Xie Qingcheng. This time, I'll protect you."

Their lips were practically touching.

He Yu's words were almost a curse.

"And I'm the only one who can protect you."

Chapter 224: Xie Qingcheng, I Want to Have a Home

HE YU WAS INDEED the best possible secret keeper.

Thanks to his unique constitution, the loyalty chip had no power over him. He had suffered a great deal in the past three years, with his loyalty openly and secretly tested on innumerable occasions, but he had never divulged the fact that Xie Qingcheng was the First Emperor to anyone.

“When I can’t leave the island, I often go down to the underground lab to see my mother,” said He Yu. “She’s my only source of comfort here.”

“Do you think she really can be brought back to life?”

“Through the Mandelaverse?” He chuckled softly. “That wouldn’t be the real her. Duan Wen’s plans might fool a lot of people, but they can’t fool me. As you know, Xie Qingcheng, I encountered something similar to the beings constructed by ‘Mandela’ as a teenager.” He paused. “I had no close friends or family as a child. To protect me, my mind created the illusion that I had a best friend, projecting the companionship I yearned for onto Xie Xue. In my own mind, I created a Xie Xue who would appear by my side whenever I needed her.”

Xie Qingcheng was silent.

“But she was fake,” He Yu said. “That was simply an instance of the Mandela effect. In reality, Xie Xue never liked me as much as I imagined. It was nothing more than me giving myself a bit of comfort. The Mandelaverse that Duan Cuizhen and her cohorts wish to create is the same. To be human means to have thoughts that cannot be controlled—to possess the full spectrum of emotion. And no matter how realistic a virtual being may be, even if it can generate original thought, it won’t be the same person as before. My sixteenth birthday was a great disappointment to me. I will not allow myself to experience that disappointment a second time.”

Without saying anything in response, Xie Qingcheng shifted to lie on his back. Covered by the blanket, all he could see was darkness, as imperceptible as the unpredictable future. Listening to He Yu’s explanation

of the Mandelaverse made him feel rather uneasy, as the premise of the project struck at the weakest point of human nature.

Not everyone had experience with the “Mandela effect” in the way that He Yu did. Not everyone was capable of resisting the temptation of illusion. In theory, the Mandelaverse could use data to recreate those who had died and provide them the ability to think for themselves. That was why Duan Cuizhen believed that once the project succeeded, there was no one in the world who could not be replaced. Family members who had passed on, friends who were dearly missed, even fictional characters who only existed in one’s imagination—they could all be recreated by the metaverse.

When the voids in people’s hearts were filled by these false individuals, who would be willing to face a reality rife with regret?

Marijuana could numb pain, cocaine could induce hallucinations, and trash media could make people kill time laughing like idiots. All these things thus became keys to accumulating wealth. People were lazy and pleasure-seeking by nature, and the sweetness of satisfaction caused many of them to become utterly lost in their obsession. The desire for drugs caused addicts to take undue risks and sell their children; the mind-altering pleasure of hallucinogenics and the temptations of money caused drug traffickers to disregard human life, slaughtering police officers indiscriminately. And those who become utterly enamored with the idol industry lost their critical thinking and became traffic-generating tools, mere puppets of capital.

So many people were already paralyzed by this degree of mental anesthesia. What kind of chaos would occur when the world that Duan Cuizhen spoke of, where “you can get whatever you want” and “anything can be replaced,” became reality? The metaverse could create an idol completely identical to a living, breathing person, one who could stay with you day and night. But if one day that idol disappeared, and the only way to keep it from leaving you was to do whatever the metaverse asked—in that situation, how many people would agree?

What if it wasn’t an idol but a deceased loved one? How many people would do anything to keep their parents, children, brothers and sisters?

If such a day really did come to pass, would the humans be creating the virtual world, or would the two-dimensional world control the humans? Xie Qingcheng could feel his heart pounding as he recalled the pair of berserkers he encountered. All they could do was recreate his parents' behaviors based on some habitual thought patterns, but that alone had made Zheng Jingfeng lose control and left Xie Qingcheng heartbroken.

What if this technology matured to the point that it could produce a living, breathing replica of Xie Ping and Zhou Muying and return them to his side? How could he be certain that he would always maintain his rationality, even knowing that it was all an illusion, that these weren't actually his parents?

He Yu could sense his unease. "Your heart's racing."

Silence.

"What are you thinking?"

"...Nothing." Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes, palms damp with sweat.

As he leaned in closer to Xie Qingcheng, it was as if He Yu could peer into his heart. "It's terrifying, isn't it?" he said. "When I first learned about all of this, I barely got any sleep for three nights straight."

No answer.

"But we still have time to put a stop to it all," He Yu added. "The battle will soon begin. As long as we destroy Mandela Island and send all these monsters back to hell, those frightful things won't become reality—at the very least, not within our lifetime."

Xie Qingcheng knew that he needed to stop thinking about this. It was like gazing into a bottomless abyss; the more he pondered it, the more terrified he became. Squeezing his eyes shut, he attempted to compose himself. Since his flare-up he felt like a glass on the verge of shattering, liable to break down at any moment. And to make matters worse, there was no way for him to get any treatment right now—sheer force of will was the only way to endure his gradually worsening condition.

He slowed his breaths and did his best to minimize his emotional fluctuations.

“Are you...feeling sick?” asked He Yu, hesitantly.

“I’m fine...”

He Yu had known that the truth about Mandela would make Xie Qingcheng feel ill—his mental condition was quite poor to begin with, and the pregnancy symptoms of Case No. 2’s blood serum had left him in an even more delicate state—but he had no choice but to tell him. Still, he was very worried, and after a moment of thought, he said, “Hold on, let me find you a video to help keep you distracted.”

It was unbelievable that He Yu wanted to show him porn right now. What kind of rotten idea was this? “Put that away,” Xie Qingcheng said in a clipped voice, ashen-faced.

“You used to watch these all the time. I’m sure it’ll work!”

“When have I *ever* watched such...”

His voice petered off as He Yu handed him his freshly charged phone. As he stared in shock, the blue glow of the screen reflected in his peach-blossom eyes, rendering them vast pools of seawater.

“Look, a jellyfish video.” He Yu’s voice was soft. “The kind that you like.”

Xie Qingcheng found himself unable to respond.

“Here, take it.”

The small space beneath the blanket lit up with the colors of the ocean, as if they were floating deep beneath an ancient sea. Xie Qingcheng’s body shook with a fine tremor. Suddenly, he lifted his hand and covered the screen.

“What’s wrong?” asked He Yu, startled.

“...It’s nothing.” Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes, obscuring the interplay of light and shadow beyond him with his long, soft lashes. “It’s nothing,” he repeated, voice slightly hoarse. “I just...can’t see very well anymore. Looking at the screen hurts my eyes.”

He was lying.

The truth was that ever since the incident three years ago, he no longer dared to watch jellyfish videos; they made him think of the ocean.

Whenever he thought of the ocean, he would think of the person whom he had sunk beneath its surface. After He Yu died, there was only one time he had accidentally opened a jellyfish video; he'd stared at the screen in a daze for a while, until his eyes blurred over. It was as if he could see that person, his arms outstretched, slowly sinking into the sea until he disappeared completely from sight.

After the night he'd watched that video, he didn't sleep for an entire day. After that there weren't any of them on his cell phone, and the folder named "happiness" on his computer became permanently empty, all because of that boy.

There was another long stretch of silence. Xie Qingcheng was completely unused to treating himself like a human being, and he was fighting to control his emotions and overcome his weakness. In an effort to divert He Yu's attention, he switched the topic back to work. "You never finished telling me about Lu Yuzhu from Qingli County..."

But He Yu set down his phone and placed his hand lightly over Xie Qingcheng's eyes. His palm spread a gentle warmth against Xie Qingcheng's eyelids. "Hey," He Yu said quietly, "even robots need to be charged."

Silence.

"We don't need to talk about Lu Yuzhu right away. It's not urgent. You're feeling unwell, so let's stop here for today."

It was strange; with He Yu's hand covering his eyes, he was once again plunged into darkness, but this time he was no longer overwhelmed with fear. His palm seemed to contain an invisible rose that bloomed through the endless night as far as he could see.

"Your eyes will definitely be cured someday," He Yu told him. "In fact, Mandela has a cure right now."

"I don't want any of their help."

"I know." Lowering his hand, He Yu gazed at Xie Qingcheng once more in the darkness. "That's why I didn't pursue that option. But there will be other ways in the future. When everything's over, we'll definitely find a way to treat your eyes." And after a pause: "We'll use a method you can accept."

Xie Qingcheng fell silent.

“Believe me, I’m super capable. I’ve learned so many things in the past few years.”

It wasn’t that Xie Qingcheng didn’t believe him; it was just that he had no idea if he would survive that long. And there was no way to know if He Yu was only saying this to comfort him. But when he looked at him, saw the earnestness in his eyes, he found himself reluctant to discourage him. “Well go on, then,” he offered. “Tell me what you’ve learned.”

So He Yu did just that, one item at a time.

As he listened to the gentle cadence of the young man’s low voice, Xie Qingcheng gradually relaxed, the tension of the nightmare of Mandela slowly bleeding from his body. At last he sank into a drowsy sleep.

“And then, I learned how to pilot a helicopter...” He Yu’s voice came to a stop. He could hear Xie Qingcheng’s steady breathing. This was the first time since their reunion that he had fallen into such a peaceful sleep anywhere near him.

“Xie Qingcheng?” he called out softly.

Silence. He really was asleep.

He Yu gazed at Xie Qingcheng in the darkness. He was still as handsome as ever, though his face had become unbearably thin. “Unfortunately, I never did learn how to make wontons or Yangzhou fried rice.” He Yu’s voice was a bare whisper. “I wonder if we’ll find a chance for you to make me some after we leave Mandela.”

No response followed.

After an indeterminate amount of time, the sleeping Xie Qingcheng felt a familiar, long-lost wave of warmth. Faintly, he sensed that he was dreaming—a good dream he hadn’t had in a very long time. It had been three years since He Yu last hugged him like this. But the young man holding him in his dream now was just like the boy who once gave him that little Charmander figurine, his burning heart pounding in his fiery chest.

“Xie Qingcheng,” the man whispered softly, “if we survive this next battle, how do you want to live your life?”

The warmth of his chest slowly seeped into Xie Qingcheng, taking root in his withered heart as it spread upward and outward like a sprouting seed. The heat reached Xie Qingcheng's eyes. For some inexplicable reason, he recalled taking a walk with He Yu along the Bund, He Yu smiling at him as they talked, dancing together in a dimly lit jazz bar. But he knew that was the past that he had failed to cherish—the past to which he could never return.

“Do you know what I want?” the young man murmured.

What a ridiculously sentimental dream. To think that Xie Qingcheng could actually detect a hint of timidity in the youth's voice. It was a quality that He Yu hadn't once displayed since coming back from the dead three years later—yet now, it seemed to permeate Xie Qingcheng's dreamscape.

Badump.

Badump.

In the dream, neither of them spoke, their hearts pounding out a deafening beat that echoed through the darkness.

Finally, He Yu said, “I want to have a home.” His wish landed softly against the side of Xie Qingcheng's neck like a kiss. “But I don't know who can give it to me. I no longer have any family.”

Xie Qingcheng's eyes moved slightly beneath his lids. What seemed to be tears could be felt welling up in his one seeing eye, gathering at its tail before sliding down to disappear into the hair at his temples. In that moment, just as love and hate were often indistinguishable, the line between dream and reality seemed to blur.

While Xie Qingcheng thought he was dreaming, He Yu knew that this was real. He held the sleeping Xie Qingcheng in his arms as he said those final words. Words he had no right to say when Xie Qingcheng was awake—not just because of Chen Man, but because He Yu knew he had hurt Xie Qingcheng too deeply with his love-spawned hatred.

“Sleep, Xie Qingcheng.” He tucked the blanket around the sleeping man and, after a moment of hesitation, pressed a soft kiss to Xie Qingcheng's blind eye. “...Listen to me, Ge.” His expression was tender, but because he knew that Xie Qingcheng did not belong to him, a sense of suppressed madness accompanied the words. “I still love you so much.

You're the only one that I want." He ran his fingers through Xie Qingcheng's hair, as if he were a poor boy touching an expensive doll that he would never be able to afford.

"I love you the most... I'll never let anyone else have you..." His voice grew softer, but his ardor and illness intensified. He stared at Xie Qingcheng's sleeping face. Then, in an unhinged whisper too low to be heard even if Xie Qingcheng had been awake, he said, "Do you think I should kill Chen Man...?"

For as long as He Yu couldn't have Xie Qingcheng, as gentle as he might be, he was still sick. "That way, once we leave this island, I won't have any competition...and maybe we can go back to how we once were..." Beneath the blanket, his face seemed caught between good and evil, between love and hatred, half god and half demon. "Ge... Should I take the opportunity to kill him in the chaos...? It's not like you'd know what happened..."

He Yu's voice was a desperate murmur.

"If I kill him, maybe I'll have a home. A home all my own... I won't let him take it from me."

Chapter 225: I Want to Have a Child Too

HE YU HAD A MEETING to attend, so he left early the next morning.

Xie Qingcheng woke up alone in bed. He coughed as he sat up, his body feeling heavy and exhausted. The side effects of the blood serum had slowly begun to fade, but he still felt terrible. He rose to his feet and pulled on a bathrobe before sitting back down on the bed, taking a moment to catch his breath. Then he laboriously stood back up and made his way over to the tea table to pour himself a cup of tea and use the thermometer.

100.2 degrees...

He sighed. Even though he'd cleaned up properly, he'd still come down with a fever thanks to his poor health. There was no fever medicine in He Yu's room, and to make their act more convincing, He Yu had confiscated his cell phone. With no way to contact anyone, all he could do was lie back down in bed, exhausted.

Last night had been filled with a wonderful dream, even better for the fact that it felt almost real...

His thoughts drifted from the young man in his dreams to the various problems of Mandela Island, and gradually he fell back into a weary sleep. His shallow sleep lasted for an indeterminate amount of time, before Xie Qingcheng awoke to a soft rustle of movement. Thinking that He Yu had returned, he opened his eyes only to break out into goosebumps at the sight of the person standing before him.

It was the girl who had gone missing from the set of *The Trial* months ago!

The police had been investigating her case ever since the murder of screenwriter and producer Hu Yi. But even after the death of Huang Zhilong, the whereabouts of the two missing staff members had remained a mystery. Xie Qingcheng had never expected to meet one of them here!

Even more surprising, the girl didn't seem to recognize him at all. Her gaze was fixed—it reminded him of the mentally ill patients at Cheng

Kang Psychiatric Hospital. She didn't react at all to Xie Qingcheng waking up; she simply continued to tidy the room with her head bowed, her movements stiff and mechanical. She dumped out the trash, placed the usual selection of fresh fruit on the tea table, then walked over to fix her big, blank eyes on Xie Qingcheng where he sat on the bed.

"Hello, I'm here to change your sheets. May I?"

"...Do you not know who I am?" he asked after a pause.

"I'm here to change your sheets. May I?" the girl repeated woodenly.

Staring at her, Xie Qingcheng suddenly recalled the first time they met. At the hotel the cast and crew had stayed at, she'd brought him a bouquet of flowers when he checked in, a brilliant smile on her youthful face.

"Professor Xie," she'd said, her eyes shining with enthusiasm. "Welcome to the team! Please let me know if you ever need anything. My name is—"

What was her name again?

He thought hard, but he couldn't remember. Recalling names was something he struggled with, but that brilliant smile had left a deep impression. Now all that remained of the girl whose smile was once like a dazzling bouquet of winter jasmine was an empty shell. If it hadn't been for her breathing, Xie Qingcheng would have thought she was a corpse.

"I'm here to change your sheets. May I?" the girl repeated once more, as if she wouldn't stop until she received an answer.

There was nothing for it but to rise and allow her to finish what she was doing. The young woman moved quickly and efficiently, like a well-trained hotel staff member, as she changed the bedding and then left the room without a backward glance.

The more Xie Qingcheng thought about what Mandela had done, the more disgusted he became. He tried to resist the urge, but in his feverish state the visceral horror was too overwhelming, and he had to rush to the sink to vomit. His temperature climbed as he threw up over and over throughout the afternoon. No matter the strength of his willpower, even Xie Qingcheng couldn't bear such torment. After emptying his stomach one last

time, he leaned against the edge of the sink, and washed his face. He stood there for what felt like an age, but he couldn't seem to muster the strength to walk back to bed. Instead, he slowly fell into a dazed faint.

So when He Yu stepped back into the room, he found an unconscious Xie Qingcheng collapsed against the sink. Shocked, he rushed over to help him up. "Xie Qingcheng?"

The man in his arms was burning up. His face was pale, and the corners of his tightly closed eyes were shaded red. His bathrobe gaped open, revealing an expanse of skin flushed pink with heat. He Yu hastily carried Xie Qingcheng to the bed before calling the island's doctor to bring them some fever-reducing medicine. He Yu gave it to him and watched as he dizzily sank into a feverish slumber. He gently pressed his hand to Xie Qingcheng's forehead, his mind a frantic mess. Had he gone overboard last night? Was that what had made Xie Qingcheng so sick?

Xie Qingcheng was swathed in a blanket and with his eyes shut tight, his dark lashes and pale lips the only color on his face. He Yu lay down and wrapped his arms around him. Xie Qingcheng's steely resolve had always inspired admiration in a great many people; He Yu couldn't fathom how he had become so fragile. All he wanted was to hold him, to have him.

After last night, He Yu genuinely did want to kill Chen Man. Once his meeting had ended this morning, he'd even gone so far as to press the button for the sub-basement in his private elevator—the floor where the prisoners were held.

But in the end, he didn't step out through the doors. It was because of Xie Qingcheng that he'd become overwhelmed with bloodlust, but it was also because of Xie Qingcheng that he'd forced himself to give up his insanity. It was so tempting, and his plan was so perfect. If Chen Man died...who would ever know the identity of his killer? When the blood washed away, his hands would be clean, and dead men told no tales. He could even torture Chen Man to his heart's content before he died. But...

He thought of the look on Xie Qingcheng's face as he offered him his hand. Would Xie Qingcheng truly never find out about the fact that the hand in his was stained with Chen Man's blood? If Xie Qingcheng found out, would that offer still be made...?

Standing in the elevator, He Yu had stared at himself in the mirror, at his black military uniform and his overcast face. In the end, he pressed a button, the doors closed, and he left that ice-cold basement behind.

Don't kill...

He repeated those two words again and again to that face in the mirror, his madness so consuming that even his pupils took on a demonic cast. *Don't kill. Don't do anything that cannot be undone...* He left that place behind and fled from it all.

"Xie-ge, it's okay." He Yu embraced Xie Qingcheng as if his own body warmth could alleviate Xie Qingcheng's suffering. But He Yu's murmuring seemed to take on a hint of relief; he was glad that he could still hold Xie Qingcheng with hands yet unstained by blood. "It's okay... Nothing happened... Have a good sleep. I'm back—I won't be leaving again today. Nothing will happen to you while I'm here, so sleep..."

The medicine was very effective, and by that evening, Xie Qingcheng's fever had subsided. He frowned slightly as he woke up, realizing that he was lying in He Yu's arms, drenched in sweat.

"What..."

"You're awake?" He Yu touched his forehead. "Do you remember? You fainted from fever."

Xie Qingcheng's memory slowly returned to him. "I met someone—the girl who came to change the sheets..." he murmured, scrubbing at his face. "I recognized her, but she was like a living corpse—one of the staff members who disappeared from the set of *The Trial*." His voice was a bit hoarse, and his eyes were still foggy. "What is going on..."

Seeing him like this, He Yu suddenly realized that the appearance of an acquaintance must have upset Xie Qingcheng very much. Despite his weakness, his encounter with that girl had become a matter of great concern to him—unless He Yu gave an explanation, he probably wouldn't be able to recover completely from his condition. He handed him a cup of water. "Calm down. Here, drink this."

Xie Qingcheng took a shallow sip.

"Drink all of it," He Yu admonished. This earned him a look.

Once Xie Qingcheng had downed the whole cup, He Yu explained. “That girl was one of the island’s test subjects,” he said.

“...What did they do to her?”

“A lot of things. Most of the people on this island were abducted by Huang Zhilong back when he first founded his entertainment company. Back in those earlier years, the police lacked the means to investigate them, so the syndicate abducted countless young people—especially women, because Duan Cuizhen prefers female subordinates. But as the police’s procedural methods grew more advanced, it became increasingly difficult for Duan Cuizhen to obtain living people, and so she conducted all sorts of experiments to reuse the victims they had already abducted. Their subjects would end up like that girl: Once their minds were completely destroyed, the researchers would implant a chip in their brains. They might still be alive, but they are no longer sentient. The syndicate either uses them for grunt work or turns them into cyborgs through surgical procedures. The other missing girl suffered the same fate.”

“Are they...beyond saving?”

“Yes,” He Yu replied. “They’ve already undergone brain surgery. They no longer have any sense of self.”

There was a long silence. “Was the Lu Yuzhu that we encountered in Qingli County the same?” Xie Qingcheng asked at last.

“More or less,” He Yu said. “That was one of Lu Yuzhu’s clones. When it became increasingly difficult for Huang Zhilong to abduct people, Duan Cuizhen began looking toward other solutions, like cloning technology. In the past ten years, Mandela has made numerous attempts at cloning. In the end, they concluded that though it is possible, the survival rate is extremely low. The resulting clones are also difficult to train, lacking in combat capability. However, Lu Yuzhu’s genes were unusually suitable for cloning.”

A chill ran down Xie Qingcheng’s spine as he recalled their conversation with Lu Yuzhu in the school archives, of her chance encounter with Duan Wen. “Could it be that Duan Wen saved Lu Yuzhu because they somehow identified the unique nature of her genes? And after they finished analyzing her, they allowed her to sacrifice herself in the archives to prevent similar organizations from discovering her existence...?”

“He’s never mentioned it before,” He Yu said, “but I think so. Duan Wen is no philanthropist.”

Xie Qingcheng broke into another spate of coughs. Whether because this prospect was so horrifying to behold or because he was simply so ill, he suddenly felt a surge of nausea accompanied by a wave of dizziness.

It was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Shoving He Yu aside and turning away, he tried to suppress his malaise—but that only caused his discomfort to surge, breaking through the dam of his control with a vengeance. He leaned against the side of the bed, coughing violently with his hand clasped over his mouth, and in the end he had no choice but to stumble back into the bathroom and throw up again.

After a while, the bathroom door opened behind him. He Yu watched as Xie Qingcheng stood before the sink and splashed water onto his pale face. He walked over to drape a bathrobe over Xie Qingcheng’s shoulders.

Lifting his head, eyes red-rimmed and damp from discomfort, Xie Qingcheng glanced up at He Yu in the mirror as water dripped from his brow. Closing his eyes, he said, “Thank you.”

Borrowing the motion of wrapping the bathrobe around him, He Yu pulled Xie Qingcheng into a hug. “What’s wrong with you? Why are you throwing up so much?”

“Hell if I know. Maybe it’s because everything Mandela does is so disgusting.” Xie Qingcheng washed his face with another handful of water. “It’s not because of my fever.”

“Should I ask the doctor tomorrow to...?”

“No.” Xie Qingcheng sucked in a shuddering breath. He felt better now that he’d thrown up. “This is Mandela Island,” he said softly. “We have to be wary—not just of the doctors here, but also the things that we eat and drink.” He paused. “I’m a doctor myself, so don’t worry. I’m aware of my own condition. I’ll be fine.”

Doctor Xie’s unique constitution was a secret to all but a select handful of people. Even when he’d moved to the United States for treatment, everyone tacitly went along with the narrative that his condition was a consequence of his physical weakness, that he needed to convalesce to recover. They’d even faked a number of his medical records. The fact

that he had suffered multiple organ failure had been carefully covered up, to prevent anyone with ulterior motives from finding out.

Meanwhile, He Yu had been closely monitored for a long time; he hadn't dared pay too much attention to Xie Qingcheng. Even though he knew now that Xie Qingcheng was sick, he had no idea how severe his condition was. Xie Qingcheng, already on high alert, was all the more cautious now that He Yu had told him Duan Cuizhen's story.

Realizing he had become careless in his concern, He Yu said promptly, "All right, I won't say anything." But he couldn't help adding, "But right now, you're so..."

"It might be my body's unique reaction to the fading effects of the blood serum from Case No. 2," Xie Qingcheng said. "Let's wait and see for a few days before we do anything rash."

He Yu hummed in agreement, but in a moment, his almond eyes widened slightly as a thought struck him. "Xie Qingcheng," he breathed.

"Hm?" Xie Qingcheng met his eyes in the mirror.

He paled, then flushed. "D'you think... D'you think this might be like how Patient No. 2's... Like..."

"Like what?" After he'd just broken his fever and thrown up, Xie Qingcheng's complexion was ghastly, and he looked rather terrifying.

As he stroked a hand over the flat plane of Xie Qingcheng's abdomen, He Yu's voice grew even softer. "I mean... Can the serum make you...make you...give you the ability to..."

"The ability to what?" Xie Qingcheng had no idea what he was getting at.

He Yu hesitated for a moment. "I mean," he murmured into Xie Qingcheng's ear. "What if it gives you the ability to get pregnant..."

Xie Qingcheng was so angry that he nearly threw up again. After another lengthy bout of coughing, he finally gathered enough breath to gasp out, "He Yu, are you crazy? What are you thinking? First of all, it's just a serum; it's not that powerful. Second—" His sword-straight brows arched into a scowl as his pale face flushed faintly with embarrassment and anger. "I'm a fucking man!" he bit out. "Even if I were a woman, I wouldn't start

throwing up the morning after having sex. You're twenty-three years old—how do you have such little common sense?!"

"Of course I know that, but the blood serum..."

"I forbid you from mentioning the blood serum in my presence!"

But you're the one who mentioned it first...

Seeing how pallid Xie Qingcheng was now, though, there was no way He Yu could say anything. He hastily offered his Xie-ge a few words of comfort before coaxing him back to bed.

That evening, Xie Qingcheng still felt rather glum. The fever was likely because he overexerted himself the night before, but the waves of nausea were indeed strange. The idea that he could be pregnant was completely impossible, utterly absurd—but then what was causing these symptoms? Why did they only present after he had sex with He Yu? Was this some sort of specific pathological reaction? He pondered it at length, but he couldn't figure it out.

Once they were in bed, He Yu wanted to hold him while they slept again, but Xie Qingcheng refused.

"I'm not used to being held."

After all, what grown man would enjoy something like that? The fact that He Yu actually believed they could have kids together simply because they had sex the night before made Xie Qingcheng all the more unwilling.

He Yu was shockingly considerate this time. Opening his arms, he said magnanimously, "Then you can hold me, Gege."

Xie Qingcheng was speechless.

After two days of rest, his illness gradually subsided. But that inexplicable nausea remained. When He Yu finally saw that Xie Qingcheng was sleeping soundly and his fever wasn't returning, he breathed a sigh of relief. He left the suite early in the morning and headed for the laboratory on time as usual.

During his lunch break, however, something suddenly popped into his head. After a moment of thought, he headed for the supply department downstairs...

Chapter 226: So I Can't Help but Treat You Well

“**E**XECUTIVE HE, how can I help you?”

The supply department resembled a store, but no payment was necessary—the merchandise in stock was all for the use of the syndicate’s internal personnel.

“I’m here to pick up some medicinal ingredients and laboratory equipment,” said He Yu. “Here’s a list of everything I need.”

The shop assistant put on his glasses and skimmed over the list. “No problem, please give me a moment,” he said with a smile.

He Yu stood at the counter beside the TV, where an Australian talent show was flickering across the screen, and looked around aimlessly as he waited for the assistant to return. His eyes caught on the display next to the cash register: several rows of condoms. In addition to the usual types you could find anywhere, there was also a selection of products that the island’s researchers had created out of boredom, exclusive to Mandela. He Yu had had no interest in these items before, but things were different now. After a moment of hesitation, he picked up an innocuous-looking box.

Upon closer examination, it was labeled with a concise handful of words: *Excellent after-sales service provided. In the event of breakage, I will deliver the baby.* The name of a bored researcher was listed below. He picked up another box—the pinkest of the lot. This one said: *Pick me! I’m even more effective than the beast-taming pill.* Another bored researcher was named.

The next box he picked up looked a bit strange. It was inscribed with a line of words that said, *Illicit Technology: Pregnancy Enhancement Condoms. Pregnancy guaranteed!* Followed by the name of yet another excruciatingly bored researcher.

When the shop assistant returned with a plastic bag full of goods, he saw He Yu studying the condom display. “Boss He, would you like me to explain the different effects?” A smile lit the man’s face again.

Accepting the bag, He Yu briefly hesitated, then nodded.

That evening, He Yu returned to his suite with a bag full of medicinal ingredients, meant to reduce cough and calm the mind, as well as several boxes of condoms. He was back earlier than usual, and the moment he walked through the door, he was greeted by the sight of Xie Qingcheng writing at the desk with his head bowed over his work.

Xie Qingcheng didn't have to put on an act of the desperate and exhausted prisoner to fool the surveillance anymore. Mandela knew about his tenacious personality, and that he wasn't the type to waste time on feeling depressed. With no means of escape, he would save his strength and avoid making any unnecessary struggle. The opportunity to break out of confinement might come at any moment, so he'd keep a cool head and wait for his chance. That was by far the more convincing act.

When He Yu saw Xie Qingcheng sitting there, perfectly calm, he couldn't help but stare, transfixed, for just a moment.

His suite had been remodeled after the guest room at the old He family villa, with even the carpet aged to his request. Xie Qingcheng sat at the writing desk with his eyes downcast. A lonely moon hung in the sky outside the window, its pale light slanting through the glass to shine upon his seated figure. It looked as if he was wearing a white dress shirt from years past, a striking resemblance to the uniform he once wore as a doctor. For a second, He Yu felt as if time was flowing in reverse.



As if he needed only to call out “Doctor Xie” and a young Xie Qingcheng would look up at him from the desk and ask in that calm voice, “What is it, Little Devil?” And as if fulfilling his long-cherished wish, Xie Qingcheng heard the rustle of movement and turned away from his book. He laid his eyes on He Yu’s face, just as he once had over ten years ago.

But rather than gazing down at him from above, Xie Qingcheng’s eyes turned upward. With a soft cough, he asked, “What is it?”

He Yu stared at his sightless left eye and the handful of white strands scattered across his ink-dark hair. Xie Qingcheng was no longer that surpassingly handsome and graceful twenty-year-old. He snapped back to his senses as if waking from a dream. “...Nothing.”

The gentle embrace of a lover was intoxicating, and rekindling an old flame was all the more distracting. It should have come as no surprise to the members of Mandela that He Yu was acting a bit out of sorts, occasionally treating Xie Qingcheng well after sleeping with him, especially when his prisoner was sick. He Yu bringing Xie Qingcheng medicine raised neither suspicion nor criticism. He Yu wasn’t completely heartless; rather, he tended to use kindness and punishment in equal measure. It would have been more suspicious if he mindlessly tortured his past lover.

He stepped into the kitchen and made them dinner himself. If the genius He Yu had one weakness, it was his lack of basic life skills. After all these years, Young Master He’s cooking still left much to be desired; he spent nearly two hours messing around in there, and produced a spread that was as unsightly as ever.

But even if the dishes tasted terrible, they were at least nutritious. There was duck and noble dendrobium stew, pork rib soup with American ginseng, lily bulbs, and fig, and various other medicinal foods to help clear phlegm and soothe his cough. There was also a clay pot filled with beef brisket simmered with tomatoes and potatoes—something Xie Qingcheng could eat when he was feeling ill and lacking appetite.

Xie Qingcheng coughed as he sifted through the soup. “Where did you get American ginseng?”

“I got it from the pharmacy.”

“...And the pork lungs?”

“From Zoya’s pigs.”

“She’s...raising pigs on the island?”

“She set up a little farm with all sorts of animals and produce. It’s all organic, too—she does all of the planting and feeding herself.”

Xie Qingcheng set down his spoon. Even if they were organic, he still didn’t have it in him to eat pork lungs. And he also found He Yu’s explanation a bit odd; Zoya was a fugitive from the law, wanted for conducting cruel experiments in the Chernobyl exclusion zone. He couldn’t imagine a person like that running a farm.

He Yu could tell what he was thinking. “Zoya actually doesn’t particularly care for science and technology. She always says that she’ll become a farmer once the Mandelaverse becomes reality.”

“...She dislikes science and technology?”

“You could even say that she hates it,” He Yu said. “She may be an expert in her field, but apparently it also caused the death of her daughter. She was the only family Zoya had.”

Silence fell.

Xie Qingcheng really forgot about his health the moment they started talking about work. “Can you finish your soup first?” He Yu said, exasperated.

But Xie Qingcheng ignored him. “That Zoya...”

“I’ll give you the full story in detail after you drink all your soup. Otherwise, I won’t tell you anything.”

This left Xie Qingcheng speechless. But as the saying went, a man had no choice but to bow his head when he stood beneath another man’s roof. He had no choice but to do as he was told.

“Eat the pork lungs too.”

“That’s enough out of you,” Xie Qingcheng said. “There’s no way I can eat this stuff.” He folded his hands and looked up. “Now, tell me.”

He Yu sighed. It wasn’t like he could force the food down Xie Qingcheng’s throat. After a moment of thought, he said, “The girl that you met in the frost laser’s control room—that was her daughter.”

Xie Qingcheng recalled the little blonde girl holding a doll in the laser's main control room. Now that he thought about it, she did bear a strong resemblance to Zoya. He nodded.

"The scientists on the island don't typically ask each other about their past," He Yu explained. "None of us know why Zoya is alone, or if she ever had a husband. One time she mentioned in passing that her daughter was killed, though... Zoya used to work in a private laboratory, so maybe she was betrayed by someone she trusted. She ended up becoming incredibly cruel and selfish—a complete villain—but the motivation that drives her to commit that evil is much simpler than most other inhabitants on this island. Her every experiment and invention is for the purpose of resurrecting her child. The berserkers are just one example. In that case, Zoya was trying to implant one person's consciousness into another person's brain."

"Was the girl in the frost laser's control room another one of her experiments?"

"Yes," confirmed He Yu. "She's the prototype of a person reborn in the metaverse. You've seen how lifelike she is. She's like Teresa Teng, who was 'resurrected' as a hologram. She can walk around, sing songs, even speak; but instead of programming all of that, Zoya used a portion of her daughter's brain she preserved to generate those behaviors from thoughts. They're very simple thoughts—she can perform a few motions on repeat—but nevertheless, she's brought Zoya a great deal of hope."

There was no response to this.

"Zoya's request to the syndicate is that after the Mandelaverse has been established, they provide her daughter a physical body so she can return to her side. After that, the two of them will retire to her hometown, and she'll never touch scientific research ever again. Great-Grandmother agreed."

"Asking a tiger for its own skin... Do they really expect her to keep her word?"

The range hood had been deliberately turned to the highest setting while He Yu was cooking, and he left it running even after he finished. With the two of them sitting close together and speaking softly, even if Duan Wen observed them through the surveillance camera, he couldn't tell what they were talking about.

“They have no choice but to trust her,” He Yu said.

A thought struck Xie Qingcheng, and he frowned slightly. “Why have none of the scientists on the island tried to usurp Duan Cuizhen’s position...? Are they really all perfectly content to work for her?”

“Duan Wen has done a very good job of protecting Duan Cuizhen,” He Yu replied. “Usually only high-ranking members of the syndicate ever have the chance to meet with her. Lately though, her health has been deteriorating, so even the higher-ups haven’t seen much of her. Besides, I feel like there’s some sort of unspoken secret among the high-ranking syndicate members, something they’ve been keeping from me. Whatever it is, it probably explains why they all wholeheartedly accept Duan Cuizhen as their leader. I have a feeling that the leader of the Dreambreakers is also investigating whatever this secret is.”

“Well, has he figured it out yet?” Xie Qingcheng asked.

He Yu shook his head; he didn’t know either. “But never mind that.” Setting down his soup spoon, he rose to his feet. “There’s something else stewing on the stove—let me fetch it for you.”

As Xie Qingcheng lifted the lid of the porcelain cup, he was surprised to see that the final course was a bowl of snow pear soup. The cored fruit was stuffed with finely ground fritillary bulbs, stewed until it turned soft, and served in a clear, sweet syrup. He looked up to meet He Yu’s eyes.

“I stewed it for a very long time,” He Yu said. “Hurry up and eat it while it’s still hot.” After a pause, he added, “Don’t waste it the way you did three years ago.”

Three years ago, when Xie Qingcheng broke up with He Yu, another bowl of snow pear soup had been left sitting in the kitchen. And rather than eating it, Xie Qingcheng had simply put on his clothes and walked out.

Lowering his lashes, Xie Qingcheng gazed down at the soup, an uncertain feeling unfurling once more in his heart like a tendril of pale smoke. Beyond the smoke lay He Yu’s face, like flowers wreathed in mist. Xie Qingcheng turned away slightly, lost in thought, unsure whether this snow pear soup held even a little bit of the infatuation and tenderness of years past.

That night, before they fell asleep, He Yu reached out to turn off the light as usual. But when he tucked his hand back beneath the blanket, there was something in his palm. His movements were perfectly natural. If Duan Wen was watching them through the surveillance camera, all he would assume was that He Yu had turned off the light because they were getting ready for bed.

He Yu handed the object in his palm to Xie Qingcheng. It was an inconspicuous-looking and simply adorned leather wrist cuff. Grabbing Xie Qingcheng's hand, He Yu buckled the cuff to his wrist with a grip that brooked no resistance.

"What's this?"

"A Fengbo cuff," he whispered, lips pressed to Xie Qingcheng's ear. "I bought the materials and modified it this afternoon. It can't be detected by Duan Wen's surveillance system. If anything happens, like your fever from a few days ago...you can use it to contact me, or police headquarters, at any time. Wear it. It'll make me feel better."

He Yu was gripping Xie Qingcheng's hand tightly as he spoke. In that moment, he believed they were both remembering the same incident from several years ago—after one of He Yu's flare-ups, Xie Qingcheng had given him a wrist monitor. It had stayed on his person always, up until the naval battle. When he plunged into the ocean, the monitor had sunk into the sea.

"Don't lose it," he said.

Xie Qingcheng ran his fingers over the cuff and made no response.

"Do you want to try it?" said He Yu. "I've already adjusted the frequency."

The cuff had a leather buckle that was actually a hidden earbud. Adjusting the strap and placing it in his ear, sure enough, Xie Qingcheng heard a beeping sound to indicate that signal reception had been established. "Fengbo system activated," said a mechanical voice. "Welcome, new user."

"Contact headquarters," he said, his voice a bare whisper.

"Message received. Contacting headquarters..."

In a matter of seconds, Fengbo really did connect to the command center back in Huzhou. The voice of the police commander, which Xie Qingcheng hadn't heard in days, came through. "Xie Qingcheng?"

He couldn't help but glance at He Yu before responding.

The commander was very surprised to hear from him. After they'd exchanged a few words, he said, "He Yu has already informed us of the situation over there. Take caution—do not take any unnecessary risks, and save your strength. We're working on decoding the flash-freeze frost laser and will soon devise the necessary countermeasures. Until then, work with He Yu to stabilize the situation on the island and prevent Mandela from noticing any abnormalities. Understood?"

"...Understood."

Xie Qingcheng was left a bit conflicted. He Yu had told headquarters on multiple occasions that Mandela Island wasn't as improbable as it seemed, but because he was mentally ill, command refused to believe him even when he was telling the truth. Xie Qingcheng suddenly felt like he was standing on the outside of a dream; though he knew the truth of the matter, he couldn't wake the ones who were still dreaming, who still regarded illusions as reality.

He had always believed in the importance of the truth. But now he was coming to realize that to many people, the truth was only whatever fit their worldview. The facts were held by those who were considered "normal," with the mainstream dictating absolute reality. To protect the things that they wanted to protect, people could only ever default to established social norms. An indescribable feeling welled up in Xie Qingcheng's heart.

The commander was still working through his instructions. "This is a dangerous mission, but in the end, we will surely achieve victory—"

"Sir," Xie Qingcheng interrupted him.

A pause. "What is it?"

"It's about this island. You should know that—"

"You should know that we have a good grasp of the situation here on the island, so there's no need to worry," He Yu cut in before he could finish.

He gave Xie Qingcheng a look, an indication to stop speaking.

The commander started in surprise. “It’s quite late on Mandela Island right now—is He Yu with you?”

Before Xie Qingcheng could respond, He Yu grabbed his hand and wrote into his palm with a finger, *Don’t say it. I didn’t tell him everything.*

After all, sharing a bed and having sex with a colleague for the sake of maintaining cover wasn’t really something to brag about. Neither of them had any desire to report this detail to their superior at headquarters, so Xie Qingcheng gave a perfunctory answer and ended the call.

“Why wouldn’t you let me corroborate your statement?” Xie Qingcheng asked.

“They’ll start treating you like a lunatic too,” He Yu told him. “Or they’ll think I brainwashed you.”

There was no way to respond to that.

“You can’t convince a dog that the world is full of colors,” He Yu went on. “Of course, I’m not calling our commander a dog, but I don’t think it’s necessary to make him believe what I say is true. Mandela’s weapons weren’t as advanced three years ago, but now the people here are just as dangerous as actual robots. The people who have been brainwashed—their bodies have been equipped with all sorts of weapons and explosives. Our ultimate goal is to destroy this island. When the time comes, it won’t matter whose understanding of the situation is right or wrong.”

He paused. A light glimmered in the cavernous depths of his eyes. “I’m sure that once we’ve caught all the perpetrators, the Dreambreakers will realize that I’ve never once lied to them.”

With work out of the way, only personal business remained. After a few beats of silence, He Yu asked, “Did you throw up today?”

Xie Qingcheng was still dwelling on their call with Dreambreaker command. “Just once,” he said absently. “I’m fine.”

“Oh,” said He Yu, as if he was considering something. A moment later, he leaned into Xie Qingcheng’s space. “Uhh, so, I bought some things today.”

“What did you buy?” asked Xie Qingcheng, his mind still elsewhere.

He Yu hesitated. “I was just thinking—while we’re acting things out, maybe we should take some precautions...”

“Mm...” Xie Qingcheng hummed vaguely, still distracted. After a moment, he snapped back to his senses. “What was that?”

The expression on He Yu’s face dripped awkwardness. “Well, what if—I’m saying *what if*—there really is the possibility that you can get...*you know*... Given the present circumstances, I think it might be better if we did it like this...”

For a moment, Xie Qingcheng couldn’t decide if he was angry or amused. While it was funny—because of course this would be the only time He Yu thought to use protection—it was also infuriating. He Yu actually believed something so absurd? The whole thing left Xie Qingcheng utterly speechless. As he struggled for words, his patriarchal instincts raised their head. Grabbing He Yu by the chin, he said, “If you’re really worried about that sort of thing, why don’t you let me top instead?”

He Yu’s eyes boggled.

Xie Qingcheng was a very masculine man. In fact, with his restrained yet imposing aura, straight black brows, and sharply defined features, he was far more so than He Yu. He had broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and long legs; his hands alone were masculine enough to make women and bottoms alike swoon. Everything about him was strong and hard; there was indeed no reason for him to resign himself to the position of the receiving partner.

His relative lack of interest in sex combined with his reluctance to take initiative meant that he was quite open-minded about these things, and so he had never challenged He Yu on any of this before. It wasn’t until He Yu’s repeated insistence that he might be with child that Xie Qingcheng finally lost his temper, ominously suggesting that He Yu should bottom.

“Well? How about it?” asked Xie Qingcheng, a hint of dominance in his languid voice as he leaned back against the pillow. “We’re under the covers, so it’s not like Duan Wen would be able to tell.”

For a few seconds, He Yu just stared at him, before pressing him down into the sheets. Pinning Xie Qingcheng’s slender hand to his pillow, he said, “Absolutely not.”

Xie Qingcheng had meant the words in jest—he had no intention of carrying through with his suggestion—so he was surprised by how emphatically He Yu rejected his proposal. The once-married man narrowed his eyes. “Why.”

He Yu paused. Then, tucking away his thought that Xie Qingcheng was only suitable for bottoming, he wheedled shamelessly so they could get down to business. “Ge, you look so strong, and I have bad pain tolerance.”

Silence.

Only a stupid person would fight force with force. In contrast, smart people knew when to show weakness. If necessary, they could dole out flattery as well.

Xie Qingcheng was accustomed to taking care of others. Sure enough, he had nothing to say in response to that, and could only allow He Yu to kiss him. The triumphant smile in He Yu’s eyes went unnoticed as he buried his face in Xie Qingcheng’s throat to kiss his neck.

Chapter 227: A Facade Half Torn

SEVERAL DAYS PASSED just like that, in the calm before the storm.

The police commander had ordered them to maintain the status quo, so they did as they were told. The metaphorical arrow was already nocked to the string; there was no room for error now, as the smallest mistake could cause the entire operation to fail. Understanding what was at stake, Xie Qingcheng and He Yu became increasingly cautious in both the mission and their own personal interactions.

He Yu left in the morning and returned in the evening, and the two of them worked together with the police to expand their knowledge of the island. After dinner, Xie Qingcheng would take his medicine and turn in. He Yu would sit at his desk and read for a while before joining him in bed. Apparently they had dispelled Duan Wen's suspicions, for he no longer sent people to check their bedding every day. But out of an abundance of caution, they nonetheless continued their performance every night, rocking the bed while they writhed beneath the blankets.

Putting on this show was actually quite difficult; like any actors trying to realistically portray a lengthy sexual encounter, they found themselves struggling to stay in control. Now that the effects of the blood serum had subsided, Xie Qingcheng's reactions weren't too bad anymore. Unfortunately, the same could not be said of He Yu.

Ever since the police commander had ordered them to stay on high alert, not wanting to be caught off guard by a sudden, unexpected mission, they'd stopped having penetrative sex. Even with just frottage, though, there were times when their arousal became unbearable. He Yu's pants would tent with lust as he rutted his thick, searing length against the dip in Xie Qingcheng's ass, as if he could somehow fuck him through the damp fabric. Wetness would soak his underwear as he thrust again and again, almost frantic.

When he couldn't bear it any longer, he would shove a pillow between them so he wasn't actually rubbing against Xie Qingcheng's ass.

And once he was on the verge of coming, he would press his abdomen against the cushion and jerk his hips forward, over and over. Grasping his swollen erection, he'd stroke himself to completion with a deeply furrowed brow.

He would always come on Xie Qingcheng, covering his ass and thighs with ropes of viscous spend. He would also pant harshly into Xie Qingcheng's ear until the sensation filled him with discomfort. He Yu fucking him through the pillow only seemed to increase the pressure against his abdomen, the forbidden feeling of being fucked yet not entered coalescing into an excruciating tingling sensation that only stoked the fire in his belly hotter.

Through the following nights, He Yu found the pillow increasingly uncomfortable. Once, when he thrust too hard, it slipped out from between their bodies. Too drunk on desire to bother dragging it back, he pressed his pelvis against the join of Xie Qingcheng's legs, feeling the warm, smooth skin of his inner thighs. Orgasm imminent, he lost all sense of reason: He yanked down Xie Qingcheng's underwear, then released his own unyieldingly erect cock from its own confines. Pressing his hardness directly against Xie Qingcheng's bare hole, he jerked off frantically until he came, coating his colleague's thighs with slick.

Following this incident, a distinctly complicated mood settled over them.

Xie Qingcheng knew that He Yu had never slept with Anthony, but he still believed that He Yu no longer loved him as wholeheartedly as he did before. He assumed that He Yu was only acting this way in service of their mission, and because all ordinary men felt lust and desire.

Meanwhile, He Yu's assumptions were even worse. He still thought that Xie Qingcheng was dating Chen Man, and that he was likewise only cooperating for the sake of the mission. They both knew they had each other's forgiveness, and that they both still desired each other, but neither of them dared to mention anything beyond that—certainly not love.

And with the battle about to begin, there were still too many important things vying for their attention. It seemed terribly inappropriate to discuss their love lives at a time like this. They weren't the main characters in some prime-time TV show, talking about how they did or didn't love

each other while the soldiers outside were all busy fighting a bloody battle, getting their bodies blown to pieces, as if droves of people dying in this conflict was none of their business.

Of course they weren't the type to act like that.

If they didn't want to affect the greater mission, they only had a little time each night to indulge in their selfish desires. However, as they indulged in these desires and interacted with each other throughout each day, they found themselves gradually and inevitably dragged into the abyss of past love. Stuck on Mandela Island on the eve of a great battle, only afforded a fraction of space to be selfish—why make matters worse by brooding over unhappy realities during these brief moments of tenderness?

And so He Yu stopped thinking about Chen Man, and stopped caring about whom Xie Qingcheng was with. As the atmosphere on the island grew increasingly tense, their final days of uneasy peace drawing to a close, He Yu changed his mindset. In the time they had left, he would use their charade as an excuse to envelop Xie Qingcheng within his wingspan for one last tryst.

Meanwhile, Xie Qingcheng also stopped thinking about how He Yu felt about him. If nothing else, at least in this moment, He Yu genuinely needed him. They became wilder and wilder every night as the fires of their passion burned hotter and hotter. But, still entrenched in the assumption that they didn't love each other anymore, even though they didn't have to deal with Duan Wen's inspections, they never went all the way.

After that time He Yu removed the pillow, he began rubbing against and coming directly on Xie Qingcheng every time, leaving the bed, the blanket, his belly, his thighs, and even his ass covered in come. One night, as He Yu climaxed beneath the blanket, he found himself staring into Xie Qingcheng's peach-blossom eyes. As if prompted by an irrepressible urge, he leaned down and caught Xie Qingcheng's gasping mouth in a thoroughly gratuitous kiss.

Neither of them saw it coming—by the time they recovered their senses, they were already kissing passionately, venting their feelings through their lips. At that point, neither of them could tell who was clinging to whom. That night, He Yu finally put it in, and it wasn't for the sake of convincing Duan Wen.

With Xie Qingcheng still in poor health, He Yu was very restrained, but pushing in just the tip of his cock overwhelmed him with pleasure. All the thrusting against the pillow and frotting against Xie Qingcheng's ass over the past few days felt like nothing more than an appetizer for the main course, only serving to make the feeling of finally sinking into his body all the more exhilarating. Those inner walls had never clung to him like this before; it was as if he needed only to nudge against that clenching hole to make it start dripping with slick.

They had no excuses that night, and yet they did something that seemed very much like making love. Xie Qingcheng lay across the sheets as He Yu fucked him from behind again and again, the bed creaking with the force of it. His back arched gently, his body rocking with He Yu's thrusts as a brilliant pink flush suffused his pale skin. He Yu had ripped open a condom, but after fucking him for a while, he couldn't bear it any longer. Pulling out his dripping cock, he removed the rubber sheath before plunging fervidly back into Xie Qingcheng's depths.

Xie Qingcheng nearly lost it. He dug his fingers into the mattress until his knuckles turned white. "You...said you would wear a fucking condom...!" he rasped.

"But if I do, you won't feel as good." He Yu could hardly think straight as he ground his hips into Xie Qingcheng, venting his love and lust. "I've already taken it off. It'll be the same as long as I pull out when I come..."

This time, he wasn't lying. He Yu's behavior in the bedroom might have been atrocious, but even with his natural inclination toward rough sex, he at least remembered that Xie Qingcheng was in poor health. Approaching climax, he pulled out from Xie Qingcheng's hot, wet hole and came all over his face with a low-pitched moan. Finished, he reached out to touch that handsome face. In the darkness beneath the blanket, he could vaguely make out Xie Qingcheng's fucked-out expression. Just like three years ago, an indescribable wave of tenderness and pain suddenly struck him.

The tenderness was because he loved him deeply. The pain was because he couldn't have him.

He leaned down and sealed his mouth over Xie Qingcheng's soft, trembling lips once more, kissing him shallow then deep. Neither of them knew what to say in the wake of what they had just done. There was nothing to say, and even if there was, neither of them dared say it. So they simply didn't talk. They barely spoke as they made love, entangling and kissing and embracing each other in silence.

Later, on a different night, as He Yu held Xie Qingcheng in the afterglow, their bodies still slick with sweat even as their heartbeats slowed, he was seized by a sudden and overwhelming impulse. Taking Xie Qingcheng's hand with lowered lashes, he pressed a kiss to the tattoo on his wrist. "Xie Qingcheng," he began softly, "tell me, if the blood serum really could give you the ability to have kids, would you be pregnant with my child by now?"

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. He wanted to repeat what he'd already told He Yu on numerous occasions—that was a false reaction, and his symptoms had long since subsided—but he was exhausted and lacked the energy to bicker.

He Yu pressed his hand over Xie Qingcheng's belly, dazed eyes filled with irrational hope. "That way, once the final battle is over, maybe you won't..."

He trailed off as he bit down on the back of Xie Qingcheng's neck with something akin to resentment. Xie Qingcheng wanted to chastise him, but as the words were on the verge of leaving his tongue, it felt like there was no point. They were no longer what they were before; lecturing He Yu would be a fruitless exercise. So he allowed He Yu to bite him like a dog, leaving the skin of his neck throbbing lightly. Only when He Yu drew blood did he finally release him.

Staring at this show of submission, He Yu suddenly blurted out, "Xie Qingcheng, you know, you never indulged me before..."

Silence.

"You always yelled at me and treated me like I was a nuisance."

More silence.

"But back then, I loved you so much. I thought you were perfect in every way, that even if you got older and became sick, I would always love

you...”

Closing his eyes, Xie Qingcheng listened to him speak. It looked like he was waiting to hear something, but he didn’t dare expect He Yu to actually say it.

If this warmth wasn’t his imagination, then perhaps he could hear He Yu say that he still loved him—but if that happened, Xie Qingcheng would no longer be able to pretend. His mental state would collapse in an instant, and the mission would be forfeit. As the silence stretched, He Yu once again pressed his lips to Xie Qingcheng’s neck, the warm tip of his tongue touching the fresh bite and eliciting a shiver.

Finally, He Yu released him. Unseen by Xie Qingcheng, his eyes were filled with a hopeless tangle of love and hate. “Xie Qingcheng.”

“...Hm?”

The stunning red of his lips was as if a rose was held in his mouth. He nuzzled Xie Qingcheng with his nose and said, his voice laced with madness, “Your blood is so sweet.”

There was a shudder in Xie Qingcheng’s heart. After the bowl of snow pear soup, countless soft kisses, and these senseless nights of entanglement, hearing these words made Xie Qingcheng’s eyes burn. Flipping over, he gazed at He Yu’s face through the night.

“What’s wrong?” He Yu asked.

Xie Qingcheng stared at him for several long seconds. In that instant, he felt himself unwilling to leave things as they were. The feeling was so strong that he knew he wouldn’t be able to hide it if not for the mission they still had to complete. But they might be called upon to carry out the most important task at any moment; how could a pair of madmen possibly bear such emotional risk? Ultimately, Xie Qingcheng had no choice but to be the normal person between them. He had never lived for himself.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” said He Yu.

Maybe Xie Qingcheng wasn’t hearing right, but he thought there was a faint tremor in He Yu’s voice. Before, it had all been for show. But now the show was over and the audience had left. Why were they still entangled with each other?

Who was it that refused this romantic drama its ending? Who had yet to wipe their face clean of makeup? Who was still standing by the edge of the stage with longing in their eyes even after the music stopped and the crowds dispersed? The false couple had acted so convincingly that even after the lights dimmed, the drums fell silent, and the cheering spectators left behind their mess of leftover food and drink, the Hegemon-King was still wearing his armor and Consort Yu was still twirling her sword.¹

Who was unwilling to have this play come to a close, incapable of putting an end to the game? The act carried on until the paper covering the window became as thin as a cicada's wing, to be shredded by the merest breath—but who was it that refused to tear through that final barrier?

“Is there...something you want to tell me?” He Yu repeated, the tremor in his voice growing more apparent.

They were like a pair of lost souls who each finally heard the other's faint call after untold ages spent wandering the fog alone. As they cast anxiously about the thick haze, they both seemed to realize something. Xie Qingcheng could tell that He Yu was already losing control. Seeing the redness of his eyes, Xie Qingcheng felt a surge of unease amid a wave of wild impulse, his instincts warning him against recklessness.

But the warm hope that He Yu gave him crested like the tide, and although he might be able to hold his tongue, he couldn't control his body. He suddenly lunged forward, catching He Yu's mouth in a kiss. “One more time,” he whispered hoarsely against He Yu's lips.

He Yu stared at Xie Qingcheng with wide eyes, heart racing, but Xie Qingcheng merely yanked on his hair and dragged him into another deep kiss.

“I want it,” he insisted. “No regrets.”

That night, their passion was overwhelming. Xie Qingcheng sat astride He Yu's lap and rocked down, and each thrust plunged deep inside him. It wasn't only He Yu's lust that was slaked this time; the cavity in his heart seemed to fill as he lost himself in the sound of Xie Qingcheng's gasps and the rhythm of his hips. Holding him, staring with infatuated eyes at the man riding him with a deep furrow in his brow, He Yu pressed a trail of kisses from Xie Qingcheng's chest to the curve of his jaw. In the end, he

couldn't resist pressing Xie Qingcheng into the bed, lifting his legs, and pounding into him as he shook all over.

They panted and writhed in the darkness, plummeting into the depths of desire as they transformed into lustful beasts, risking it all to entangle with each other, trembling. Pinned beneath He Yu's body, Xie Qingcheng arched his neck and came with a full-body shudder, as if he were on the brink of death—he'd already climaxed so many times, there was hardly anything left. With dazed eyes, he stared at He Yu's face, at those features twisted with desire. He engraved the sight deep into his heart as He Yu fucked him more and more, tipping him over the edge once again; his spend watery and thin, he abruptly blacked out—



The next morning, the two of them woke up together. More accurately, they were startled awake by a Fengbo system alert. The moment they connected, the police commander's excited voice came through the earphone. "We've done it! We've decoded the frost laser!"

The two men traded a look, both now fully awake. They knew this meant the battle was about to begin: that the war drums that they had been waiting for were finally about to sound.

"Zoya's program is highly complex. It took a lot of effort, but luckily, we've figured out a way to destroy her device..." The commander was clearly ecstatic. He was usually a serious man, but right now he couldn't control the elation in his voice. He spoke on and on...only to suddenly pause as he realized something. "Are the two of you still together?"

He Yu pressed his finger to the earphone under the cover of the blanket. "Yes, sir, please continue."

"It's five o'clock in the morning on Mandela Island right now," he said, surprised. "Are you guys..."

"We're catching up on the past." He Yu shot Xie Qingcheng a look, as if to say that there was no need to explain too much. "Do you need us to do anything on our end?"

"Oh, yes, that's right." The commander promptly gathered his thoughts and cut to the chase. "About the second full-scale assault: We have a plan, but time is of the essence. Now that we've decoded the frost laser, we must not delay. Tomorrow night at six p.m. Mandela time, a new wave of troops will land on the island as a part of Operation Headwind and begin the final decisive battle against Duan Wen. However, before then..."

"You need us to destroy the frost laser's control system, don't you?" He Yu guessed.

"Correct. Due to the frost laser's range, our troops will not have the time to approach it on landing. Furthermore, the defense mechanisms have likely been upgraded since this data was collected, so it will be practically impossible to break through from the outside. Your final mission from headquarters is to destroy the frost laser completely before the battle begins!"

From the information decoded by the technicians at central command, there were three identical components to the frost laser's control system, each complementing and supporting each other. If any one of them was destroyed, the other two would automatically begin repairing the damaged device. To completely disable the frost laser, three people, one in each control room, needed to take remote instructions from headquarters and work together to cut off all three replicas at the same time. That was the only way.

At present, between He Yu and Xie Qingcheng, they only had two people...so Zheng Jingfeng needed to be broken out before six o'clock tomorrow night. It was already five thirty in the morning, so they had only a little over thirty-six hours left to carry out the mission.

They both got out of bed, distracted by their own thoughts. As they shared a glance, their eyes were filled with a complicated tangle of emotions. To claim that their tryst last night had been completely dispassionate would be an utter lie. No matter how obtuse they might be, it was obvious their feelings for each other remained.

But who could say how deep those feelings ran. They responded to each other's signals, but now, before they could clearly express themselves, orders had arrived. There were too many things that needed to be done, all important tasks with human lives at stake. As psychological Ebola patients, they had to avoid any significant fluctuations in their emotions, which made talking about their feelings all the more inappropriate.

"You should go," said Xie Qingcheng. His voice was still hoarse from their excessive lovemaking.

He Yu did as he was told—but before he left, he glanced back at Xie Qingcheng one last time, eyes brimming with immeasurable madness. The fact that Xie Qingcheng still had feelings for him, no matter how strong or weak, was pure jubilation mixed with pain. To keep things from spiraling even further out of control, he turned away, drew a deep breath, and took his leave.

Chapter 228: I'm Here to Pick Someone Out

HE WOULD HAVE TO BE DISCREET if he was going to save Zheng Jingfeng.

Struck by inspiration, He Yu went downstairs for some breakfast as usual before heading to the laboratory for a bit. His work in the Mandela laboratory primarily concerned practicing control over his blood toxin. His blood toxin was the most aggressive comorbid ability any psychological Ebola patient possessed, and it had become astonishingly powerful post-differentiation. Unlike sensory-related abilities, which were limited to perception no matter how heightened they became, the nature of He Yu's blood toxin's power had changed dramatically as it strengthened.

For instance, in the early stage of the manifestation of He Yu's blood toxin, he could only control mentally ill patients forced to smell his blood at close range. As his ability developed, his blood had begun to influence even those who weren't mentally ill—though the effect was still limited to short distances, and it was easy for the mentally sound to break free of his control.

Over the past three years, He Yu had been working diligently to improve his control over mentally sound creatures. His laboratory was filled with all sorts of animals, including people. It was here that he would train himself, constantly using his blood toxin to compel them to complete certain tasks.

Of course, to prevent his subordinates from falling under He Yu's control, Duan Wen had had his scientists develop a "mind-clearing ring," which protected its wearer from being manipulated by the blood toxin. But the materials used to make the ring were scarce, and its manufacturing success rate was very low. Only a dozen or so such devices had been made, each for the express use of a core member of the Mandela Syndicate.

He Yu did consider using the blood toxin to control a random person and force them to cooperate while they broke into the frost laser's control room. But the risk was too great that his victim might break free from his

control. Furthermore, people under the blood toxin's control lost their sense of self-awareness, only able to perform physical movements. Disabling one of the replicas would require computational abilities far beyond those of a puppet.

So He Yu gave up on that idea, but in the end he still found his way to the basement floor.

The basement was a hellish place, filled with prisoners of war, corpses used for experiments, and mutant animal embryos that had been created by some of the island's researchers. People came and went, including a great number of guards on patrol.

"Boss He."

"Good afternoon, Boss He."

He Yu nodded in response and carried on as if he was there to pick up materials for his blood toxin training. He passed through a set of heavy doors and reached the sector where the prisoners were being held. The soldiers who had landed on the island during the first assault were already unfrozen, and were being detained in small groups of three or four.

"What kind of human subjects does Boss He require this time?" The guard responsible for this area was a Lu Yuzhu clone. Similar to the one He Yu fought at Yi Family Village, she was physically augmented to have immense attack power and quick reaction speed.

A large number of these Lu Yuzhu clones had been created after Huang Zhilong could no longer abduct ordinary humans. They had no names, only numbers, worn on bronze tags that hung from their necks from the day they were made. He Yu glanced down to see that this one was clone number 2701. Three years ago he had encountered a whole group of "Lu Yuzhu" as he handled the cargo delivery at sea. They had to cover their faces with masks when they left the island, lest the appearance of several dozen twins attract unwanted attention.

"I want someone with stronger willpower this time," he said to 2701. "There's no point in using someone who's too easy to control."

"All of these are soldiers and police officers with very strong willpower," 2701 answered calmly as she escorted He Yu down a long corridor with heavy iron doors on either side, fitted with small windows of

blast-proof glass. The whole operation bore a remarkable resemblance to the intensive care unit of Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital.

He Yu kept an eye on the people in each room as he walked. Most of them sat in silence, preserving their energy. Suddenly, he passed an empty cell. “The other rooms are all filled; why is this one empty?”

“Douglas came this morning and took away three soldiers. He plans to test out some bacteria.”

Douglas was a relatively low-ranking researcher, but He Yu had a deep impression of him; that freak was a fierce Hitler fanboy. Adolf had been dead for a century, yet Douglas still wore a Nazi badge on his sleeve. His dream was to restore a virtual version of the Führer the moment the Mandelaverse was established, and he would pay any price to achieve it.

There were hundreds of mad scientists on the island, each with different reasons for turning to this path. Many of them were at odds with each other. For instance, Zoya hated Douglas the Nazi, and had once ordered a berserker to cut off one of his legs. But when all was said and done, out of a self-interest in their deepest desires, they nonetheless gathered all together to form a dastardly, tightly knit organization, with Duan Cuizhen as their leader.

He Yu didn’t outwardly react, even as he grimaced internally. “Is he doing those pointless tests again?” he asked with an air of contempt. “The ones running bacterial experiments always use up the live specimens fastest.”

2701 offered no comment.

He asked her to open a few cells, saying that he wanted to take a closer look before choosing his subjects. 2701 did as he asked. The captive Dreambreakers looked up as the door opened, vicious looks crossing their faces as they spotted He Yu.

“You?”

His identity was kept a secret, so these soldiers had no idea that he was actually their undercover informant. Seeing him here, they were immediately overwhelmed with hatred. “You really are working for Duan Wen! You lunatic! Why would you help that villain, huh?!”

He Yu paid their accusations no mind. Clasping his hands behind his back, he stepped into the room with a click of his black leather combat boots—specially manufactured here on Mandela Island—and made his way over to the man who cursed him most fiercely. He sneered as his eyes fell on the soldier's insignia. "A mere captain, and you think you have the right to interrogate me?"

The man was incensed. His chains clanged as he struggled against his restraints, filled with the desire to transform into a vicious beast and tear through He Yu's throat with his bared teeth. "Fuck you! You're just like your fake mother—a villain! You tricked so many people into thinking that you're some kind of hero... Damn you! Damn you straight to hell!"

Listening attentively with a calm expression on his face, He Yu allowed the man to berate him as if he found this all rather amusing. When the man paused to draw breath, he smiled and said, "No need to rush. After all, between the two of us, you'll be going to hell first. Do you have any idea how many places on our island require living humans for research? And as for how you'll go about dying...there's watching yourself rot as you're eaten alive by bacteria, being slowly cooked while immersed in water... There are zoologists here who might want to lock you up with the mutant animals we've created, to see what results from your crossbreeding following a period of reproductive isolation..."

His voice was like a sharp knife dipped in poison, lethal as it slid over his opponent's skin without even pressing down; even the bravest soldier couldn't help but shudder at the sound. Their eyes met, and He Yu's mouth curved in a beautiful and dangerously soft smile.

"I wonder if the good captain can maintain his unyielding heroic spirit when that time comes?"

The man saw red. His temples visibly bulged as his face twisted like melted wax, and his lips opened and closed, perhaps whispering something.

"What? You were so energetic just a moment ago. Why turn so quiet now, after hearing all the different ways you might die?"

The man's teeth clenched in silence for a spell. Then he suddenly rasped, "Come closer if you have the guts, and I'll tell you."

2701 immediately intervened. “Boss He, this is dangerous. It would be best to keep your distance from him.”

“It’s fine.” He Yu smiled as he stepped closer. “I want to hear what he has to say.” He leaned down. “Go on then.”

“Come closer,” said the man. “A little more.”

When He Yu was within reach, the soldier lunged toward him with all his strength, roaring like a ferocious beast as he tried to bite him. However

“Stop.”

The moment his teeth were about to close around He Yu’s ear, the command came in a whisper. The man froze, saliva dripping from his mouth. He trembled all over, yet couldn’t move another inch, caught in some sort of spell.

He Yu smiled gently as he straightened up, and only then did the other prisoners in the room notice that he had cut his finger at some point. He paid no mind to the blood as it dripped, lifting the captain’s chin and closing his gaping mouth with a crimson-covered hand as if he was playing with a toy.

“My dear child.” He Yu’s voice was extremely gentle, with a hint of amusement, but it sent the temperature in the room plummeting below freezing. “It’s a terrible habit, biting people at random.”

The other soldiers watched the scene unfold in silent horror; they had no idea why their captain had suddenly fallen under He Yu’s control. He lifted a hand toward 2701.

2701 handed him a snow-white tissue without further prompting. “Boss He’s ability has once again grown stronger.”

Lowering his lashes, He Yu smiled as he slowly wiped the blood from his hands and tossed the crumpled tissue onto the ice-cold floor of the cell. Upon contact with the slippery-wet surface, the wad of paper immediately soaked through, sagging like a drooping ghost.

His smile faded as he stared at the captain’s slack gaze through almond eyes. “Useless weakling. Come on then, wake up.”

The captain twitched violently, startled awake from a dream, his eyes gathering focus. “What... What did you do to me?” he demanded, utterly bewildered.

“Nothing. I just proved that you’re no challenge to me. To me, you’re as docile as a rabbit and just as weak.”

“...Fuck you! What did you drug me with? What was it? Answer me!” The captain spat at him, but He Yu narrowly sidestepped it.

The cold light of the cell struck He Yu’s lashes, making his face look like it was covered in a layer of frost. That beautiful face, once brimming with life, changed to the sculpted features of a cold and ruthless statue. “Why should I tell you?”

He leaned slightly forward with his hands clasped behind his back, before striding out of the low-ceilinged cell. 2701 followed closely on his heels, leaving the room of terrified men behind.

Noting his overcast expression, 2701 knew that he wasn’t satisfied with the test subject he’d just seen. Sure enough, after standing in the corridor for a while, rubbing his fingers absently, He Yu drawled, “It seems that not all military or law enforcement have a strong enough will to resist the blood toxin.”

Even a clone without much emotion could sense the ominous aura around him. 2701 stood by, not daring to speak.

He Yu turned his head slightly, looking to the far end of the seemingly endless corridor. “I want the best. Give me the most capable person you have. I want the person who pulled off the most incredible feat on this island.” His voice was very soft, yet it carried an irresistible force, inspiring fear without any show of anger. After a few seconds’ pause, he finally stated his true purpose without so much as moving his eyes.

“The old police officer who nearly destroyed the frost laser—bring him to me.” The words carried an imperceptible trace of the blood toxin’s power.

Unfortunately, despite not being a high-ranking member of Mandela, the guard of such an important place was naturally equipped with a rare mind-clearing ring. Although her expression shifted minutely, in the end,

2701 was not swayed. She hesitated briefly as she came back to her senses, unsure why she had suddenly lost her train of thought.

But in the next moment, she bowed her head and said, “Apologies, Boss He, but Zheng Jingfeng cannot be used as a test subject.”

Mildly startled, He Yu thought his intentions had been discovered for a moment. He clasped his hands behind his back, regarding 2701 with grim, guarded eyes. “Oh? Is that so? Why’s that?”

“Zheng Jingfeng was sent here to destroy the frost laser, and he is a high-ranking member of the Dreambreakers,” 2701 replied. “Boss Duan intends to speak to him in person. Before then, no one is allowed to talk to him.”

Silence.

“Please forgive me, Boss He.”

He slowly lowered his hand, staring at the clone. Though frustrated by this turn of events, he couldn’t afford to alert the enemy of his plans. “Very well,” he said gently, smiling at her with fathomless eyes. There was a moment of quiet before he added, “In that case, let me find someone else.”

As he thought, staring down that long corridor, an idea sparked to life in his mind. He recalled Xie Qingcheng’s behavior last night, how he’d taken the initiative to kiss him. “No regrets,” he’d said, with a hint of their old shared passion. The devil in He Yu’s heart awakened once more to lead him astray, tempting him to keep Xie Qingcheng by his side, and eliminate all external threats.

“Which cell is Chen Yan being held in?” He Yu asked, his voice a lazy drawl. “I want to use him for my experiment.”

Chapter 229: Perhaps I Ought to Kill My Love Rival

THE CELL DOOR OPENED with a *clang*.

Chen Man was being held in solitary confinement. 2701 walked in and expressionlessly input the passcode to unlock his primary shackles, and he collapsed to the ground, his wrists and ankles still clapped in chains.

“Get up.” 2701 grabbed him by the sleeve and dragged him upright. “There’s someone here to see you.”

She hauled him over to He Yu. Everyone in the syndicate knew about He Yu and Xie Qingcheng’s relationship, so none of them would consider it suspicious for him to meet with—or torture—his romantic rival. To facilitate their conversation, He Yu found an empty cell with decent soundproofing; a bleak space, the only illumination coming from a low-wattage ceiling bulb. Dust motes floated through the beam of chilly light as it slanted over the center of the cell. Chen Man was unceremoniously shoved into the room. His restraints put him off-balance, and he stumbled and fell to one knee on the cold stone surface.

“My goodness, Officer Chen, so polite right off the bat? I must say, I’m not accustomed to such extravagant shows of obeisance.”

A man spoke from deep inside the cell. His voice was elegant and relaxed, covering an undercurrent of scorn. Chen Man jerked his head up, looking up through his messy bangs at the speaker leaning lazily back in a chair. He was situated deep in the shadows, so Chen Man couldn’t make out his face, but he knew who this was just from his voice...

Sure enough, after a brief, cautious wait, the man stood up and walked out of the darkness. His combat boots clacked across the bluestone floors as the desolate light illuminated his handsome face.

Chen Man gritted his teeth. “He Yu...!” Practically all his emotions were compressed into that single shout.

Stepping forward, He Yu raised a foot to Chen Man's chin with his boot, smiling down at him from that insulting position. "Mm, so nice to see you again." He suddenly shifted his foot to the side and kicked Chen Man onto his back, stepping on the side of his face even as he struggled and roared in fury.

"Now, this is familiar, isn't it?" He Yu's smile deepened, his lips pulling back to bare his snow-white teeth in an animalistic snarl. "Back then, I was a prisoner in that cargo bay, the meat on your chopping board... But now the situation is reversed. Now it's your turn to kneel before me, and I am the butcher."

He spoke slowly as he ground the ball of his foot into Chen Man's face. Although he didn't use much force, he took such obvious pleasure in his vengeance that it made Chen Man's hair stand on end. He Yu threw his head back and laughed, the crazed slope of his mouth identical to the wild smile he'd bared three years ago when he had been cornered on that ship. Once he'd laughed his fill, He Yu abruptly turned to look at Chen Man, the curve of his mouth flattening as his expression twisted. "Did you ever think that one day, you might be at my mercy like this?"

"I should have killed you back then!" Chen Man shouted, his eyes bloodshot, but with He Yu trampling him underfoot, he couldn't escape. "I should have shot you! You psycho... How could you join the organization that killed your mother?! Have you no sense of humanity left?!"

He Yu glanced down at him from above, eyes cold. "Yes, you should have shot me back then. If you had, there would be far fewer hassles to deal with now, but you didn't have the guts to pull the trigger. You're a coward, Chen Yan." He kicked him again, square in the chest, sending Chen Man crashing into the far wall. As he curled in on himself, his body racked with pain, He Yu stared at him, his heart boiling over with jealousy.

After a moment, He Yu turned to 2701 and said in a gentle voice, "You can step out. I'd like to spend some time catching up with him before I take him away for my experiments... Let's see if he's lucky enough to survive when I'm through with him." He cast his gaze downward, eyes grim. Striding forward in his black leather boots, he came to a stop right before Chen Man, like a beast forcing its prey into a corner.

“After all, we still have a score to settle from the naval battle three years ago, don’t we? Officer Chen.”

2701 withdrew.

Bending down, He Yu grabbed Chen Man by the collar and threw him up against the wall. He examined Chen Man’s face: from his lips to his nose to his brows, then down to his insignia and police badge. He truly loathed Chen Man. Xie Qingcheng clearly still felt something for He Yu, so if it wasn’t for this person...if this bastard hadn’t exploited the situation... Xie Qingcheng would surely have accepted him by now. The thought of Chen Man kissing Xie Qingcheng after his “death” made him want to cut off Chen Man’s hands, dig out his heart, and chop him into mincemeat—!

Kill him...

Kill him, and tell Xie Qingcheng you did your best to save him. Kill him, and there will be no one standing beside Xie Qingcheng after the battle is over. Kill him, and there will be no one else blocking your way when you return to Xie Qingcheng—

Kill him!

Madness slowly seeped into his gaze. He couldn’t help brushing his fingers over Chen Man’s eyelids, feeling the trembling of his lashes and the movement of his eyeballs...

A harsh gasp came from Chen Man. “What are you doing...? What are you doing?!”

“Me?” He Yu murmured into his ear, his voice tinged with both laughter and mockery, though still a true threat. “I want to dig your eyes out because they saw something that they shouldn’t have seen.”

Silence.

“Are you scared?” He Yu asked gently. “If you’re scared, then get down on your knees and...” His voice grew even quieter as he spoke, until it was a bare whisper softer than the hum of a mosquito. “Beg.”

“In your dreams!” Chen Man spat fiercely. “You want me to beg? You might as well kill me, He Yu! Kill me yourself!”

He Yu stared at him for a while, the look in his eyes so complex it was difficult to tell what he was thinking. He really wanted to do it, but

Chen Man taking the initiative to ask for death really put him off. Finally, his long, slender fingers loosened their grip on Chen Man's collar. He looked at Chen Man expressionlessly, his head tilted to the side. "You're such a childish brat. Why are you copying me?"

Chen Man ground his teeth. "Who the fuck is copying you?!" Sparks flew as their eyes collided in the cold beam of light.

"Are you not? You want me to kill you myself so that Xie Qingcheng will mourn for you. It's a brilliant plan, really. Look at you—you have an honest profession, comrades in arms..." He Yu's eyes swept over the police rank on Chen Man's shoulder. "You even have a gleaming police badge. Why do you want his heart, too, Officer Chen?" He sighed. "Don't you know the saying that a man who is never satisfied is like a snake trying to swallow an elephant? Why do you get to have everything?"

"Why are you saying this...?" Chen Man stared at He Yu. "You still love him, don't you?"

Like he'd been slapped in the face, He Yu froze. He abruptly slammed Chen Man's head against the wall. "Love?" he hissed, leaning into Chen Man's face. "What right do you have to ask me if I love him or not? I'm telling you, Chen Yan, I died for him. Whether I love or hate him is between the two of us! The most obvious marks on his body were all left by me. I am his first man! No matter what becomes of us, you will never have the right to question us. *You are unworthy* of asking me if I love him or not! You have no idea what he means to me... You have everything, yet you're still so greedy, trying to take the only thing that I have! He's mine!"

Realization finally dawned on Chen Man. "You really do still love him," he murmured. "But if you love him, why keep hounding him after you came back? How could you lock him up and—and treat him like that...?!"

"Do you feel bad for him?" He Yu's smile cooled as jealousy and resentment twisted into venomous snakes in his heart, constricting his humanity until it choked. "You seem nervous, Chen Yan. You ask me why, but isn't the answer obvious?"

There was no response Chen Yan could give. Their eyes met, and the sparks intensified.

“It’s because of you,” He Yu whispered. “I hate you to death, Chen Yan. The closer you get to him, the deeper my hatred becomes. I’m no saint. He might not be mine, but I would burn him to ash to keep anyone else from having him. The more upright you are, the more twisted and deplorable I become. The reason I tortured him so cruelly before—it was all because of you! Did you know that when you look at him, it makes me want to cut his face with a knife? If you look at him a second time, I’ll cut him twice! I’ll keep cutting until our darling hero doesn’t dare to look at him anymore...or until he’s become so ugly, you’ll just stop loving him!”

Chen Man paled. “You’re sick! He Yu, you can’t—”

“I can’t what?” He Yu regarded him coolly, his thin lips moving as he spoke. “I don’t care how he looks. Even if I sliced his face to ribbons, I would still love it very much. What a wonderful thought... I’d be the only one who loved him. If he really did look like that, I’d be the only one left. None of you would covet his looks anymore. He’d be disfigured, but I would be the only one who loved him. That would be amazing.” His eyes gleamed, as if he really was going to do just that.

Fear took root in Chen Man’s heart and spread its tendrils outward. The iron chains rattled as he shouted in a broken voice, “Why take your anger out on him when I’m the one you hate? He doesn’t owe you anything... He doesn’t deserve to be treated like this!”

He Yu gazed down at him from above, his eyes cold. As he watched Chen Man struggle to protect Xie Qingcheng, the intense jealousy in his heart began to twist and writhe once more.

Kill him...

This mantra rang out like an angry mob pounding their torches into the ground as they screamed and shouted.

Kill him!

His pupils reflected the image of Chen Man, continuing to beg for mercy on Xie Qingcheng’s behalf despite his own wretched state. He Yu’s anger burned even hotter.

Why? What right do you have to interfere in our business? I’ll kill you... I’ll kill you! Once the blood has been wiped clean, no one will know!

I'll kill you! The demon in his heart howled fiercer and fiercer until it finally broke free—

“Since you want to protect him so badly, I’ll give you a chance,” said He Yu menacingly. With a clang and a flash of cold light, a dagger fell onto the ground before Chen Man. He Yu walked over and unshackled one of his hands. “Kill yourself in front of me, and I promise I’ll let him go.”

Silence.

“Go on, then.”

The last bit of color in Chen Man’s face drained away.

He Yu calmly rearranged the dagger’s scabbard where it was strapped to his waist, his eyes flashing with malevolence. “Do it.”

Not a word came out of Chen Man.

“Or do you not have the courage?”

The light in the cell was so dim, the darkness blanketing them a heavy weight. Chen Man cut a sorry figure as he knelt there with his face covered in blood and grime. Time crept by minute by minute, the incandescent bulb shining down upon the two men, limning them in deep shadow.

After some time—it was impossible to say how long—Chen Man lifted his bloodstained face.

“...If I do it,” he said in a shaking voice, “will you keep your word?”

Staring at Chen Man, He Yu went still.

He hadn’t expected this to be his answer. He Yu had always looked down on Chen Man. He thought of him as nothing more than a mama’s boy, too used to relying on his family’s protection and incapable of making decisions on important matters. An outright coward. He’d tossed Chen Man the dagger to humiliate him; he wanted Chen Man to see how despicable he really was and die in shame, and he wanted Xie Qingcheng to see just what a spineless good-for-nothing Chen Man really was. How could Chen Man possibly get with Xie Qingcheng when he wasn’t even worthy of loving him?!

But Chen Man had turned around and asked him, *If I do it, will you keep your word?* He Yu's overheated mind seemed to cool a little as he considered the question. He looked down at the police officer, at Chen Man. After a moment, he said, "You have no other choice."

With that, he stopped talking and merely observed his captive.

Chen Man looked down at the dagger on the ground, his heart trembling as he saw himself—a young man in a police uniform—reflected in the snow-white gleam of the blade. Indeed, he didn't have any other choice.

He Yu had said he had an honest profession, comrades in arms, and a gleaming police badge. Chen Man suddenly realized that at this point, no matter who it was that He Yu offered in exchange, whether it was Xie Qingcheng, someone else he loved and admired like a brother, or even just an ordinary person...he had no other choice. Even if he was asked to exchange his life for a complete stranger, with no way to back out and no way to turn the situation around, he would still sacrifice himself to protect that person.

That was the choice he made years ago when he chose to wear this uniform.

He couldn't scrape out a miserable existence by using other people's lives as a shield; his profession would never allow for that. He once again locked eyes with He Yu. This man was sick in the head. Chen Man couldn't tell him that Xie Qingcheng had once staunchly protected He Yu's place in his heart. He didn't have it in him to push Xie Qingcheng back into the mire.

Swallowing hard, Chen Man picked up the dagger, hand shaking violently under He Yu's gaze, and turned the sharp end toward himself in a flash of cold light. He closed his eyes as he pointed the blade at his heart. Then, after a brief moment of hesitation, he thrust the dagger into—

Clang!

His hand throbbed with a dull pain as a gust of wind whipped past. The blade flew from his grasp and clattered to the stone-tiled ground. Stunned, Chen Man looked up in confusion at He Yu, recovering from his kick.

He Yu looked down at Chen Man through lowered lashes as he pulled the man to his feet. It was difficult to tell if his expression was filled with jealousy or lucidity, as his emotions were much too complicated and his face now much too contorted. After several long seconds of silence, He Yu's icy voice rang out. "You really are a loyal and enlightened man, Officer Chen. You will make an excellent test subject." He made sure to say it loudly enough for 2701, standing guard outside, to hear.

"What exactly are you trying to do?!" shouted Chen Man, shocked and furious. "How long do you intend to humiliate me?!"

"Oh... For a very, very long time. After all, it's quite boring here on this island. I don't have any people my own age to play with." But then, as Chen Man continued to shout at him furiously, He Yu drew closer and whispered a brief handful of words: "Listen carefully: I'm your informant."

Chen Man was thunderstruck. He nearly tripped and fell.

It was *him?! He Yu* was the informant providing his superiors with top-secret intel?! To think that he was actually—

"Congratulations on passing my test, Officer Chen," He Yu muttered into Chen Man's ear.

"Y-your test?"

"Seeing as you're brave enough to choose death, I won't kill you."

Chen Man fell silent as he realized something. "Then...if I didn't do that just now...you would have..."

In lieu of answering his question, He Yu lowered his lashes and revealed a thin smile laced with malice.

Glancing at the dagger on the ground, then back up at the person standing before him, Chen Man felt a chill creep down his spine. A psycho... This man really was a psycho...

"Now, if you would please cooperate and follow me to my laboratory upstairs, I'll tell you the whole story," He Yu said calmly. "Remember to act realistically and struggle on the way up. The second assault is scheduled for tomorrow. We have no room for any mistakes, so follow all your orders to the letter and don't make me regret sparing your life today."

He freed Chen Man's other hand as he spoke before giving him one last shove, perhaps using their current predicament to avenge a personal grudge. Chen Man was actually a much safer choice than Zheng Jingfeng. Everyone on the island knew how much He Yu hated the young police officer, so it was perfectly normal for him to torture him. No one would think they were working together.

"Let's go," said He Yu coldly.

Chapter 230: I'll Be Waiting for You Here

BY THE TIME HE YU LEFT his laboratory, it was already afternoon.

He told Chen Man the full story and gave him another secretly modified Fengbo to use. They'd agreed to make their move the next day at four o'clock in the afternoon. Until then, to avoid arousing suspicion, Chen Man was to remain in He Yu's private laboratory and act as though he was being used as a test subject in He Yu's blood toxin experiments. He Yu was reluctant to waste any more words talking to Chen Man than he absolutely had to, so he took his leave as soon as they were finished.

But he didn't return to his suite immediately; there were still some things he had to take care of. After leaving the lab, he took a circuit around the courtyard downstairs as usual, picking up some sausages to feed the control-ring-fitted hyenas. Then, he sat down on a lounge chair in the garden and played a few games on his phone. He even called several of his partners in Huzhou to talk business with a bright smile on his face.

"Executive Zhang... Ha ha ha, I saw your message. The project isn't urgent—I'm in Australia for business right now. How about this: It's been a while, so let's meet up when I get back. I'll give you my schedule, and you can see what time works best for you, okay? All right, sounds good."

"Hello, Executive Yang..."

As he did on most days, he finished his calls at a leisurely pace, then went to the ice cream shop for a scoop of pistachio before taking a walk. In reality, he was secretly noting each surveillance camera outside the Mandela stronghold, calculating the feasibility of a number of backup plans for tomorrow's mission. Around sunset, he made his way to the garden restaurant and ordered a small selection of snacks. After he'd finished his food, he donned a pair of headphones and put on some music as he made his way to a different laboratory in the complex.

A waiter stared after He Yu's receding figure as he cleaned up the juice and snack trays left behind on the garden table. Lowering his head, he

said to Duan Wen through a portable headset, “Sir, Boss He was behaving normally, but for some reason he’s now heading toward a laboratory he rarely uses... Yes, shall I follow him? Yes, sir, understood.”

An hour later, in the laboratory, He Yu frowned as he wiped the blood from his fingers. He was still unfamiliar with the instruments he was using, and he’d accidentally cut himself even making such a simple little thing. It was finally finished—right before the impending battle—but he would have to wait for it to stabilize before it could be given to its recipient.

With a sigh, he stared at the device on the lab bench. Closing his eyes briefly, he rose and walked over to the sink to strip off his bloodstained rubber gloves and wash his hands. The sky was completely dark by now. The clock on the wall read seven forty in the evening.

He packed up his things and headed for the building that contained his own quarters, where he took the elevator up and walked down the thickly carpeted corridor until he reached his suite. But he paused before touching his hand to the biometric door, staring at the Endless Summer hydrangeas carved into its surface.

This was the eve before the final battle. He had already rescued Chen Man. Tomorrow, they would all meet up, then work together to destroy the frost laser. If everything went according to plan, this would be the last night he and Xie Qingcheng would spend together. He Yu closed his eyes. He didn’t want to accept it, and he had spent the whole day mentally preparing himself. After another few seconds’ hesitation, he drew in a deep breath, entered the passcode, and pushed open the door—

The living room was empty.

The sound of running water came from the bathroom—Xie Qingcheng was taking a shower. He Yu stood there for a while, and decided it would be best not to go in. But he was so anxious about what he would soon say to Xie Qingcheng that he paced back and forth, trying to calm himself. Finally, he decided to head to the kitchen to cook some food. That way, when Xie Qingcheng finished showering, he could have something to eat, before He Yu took his time telling him what he had to say.

As He Yu walked past the dining table, though, his steps slowed to a stop.

The table was covered in a variety of home-cooked dishes made with what ingredients there were in the refrigerator. There were sweet-and-sour stuffed lotus slices, a light and refreshing vegetable and tofu soup, fragrant kung pao chicken, and a pot of golden Yangzhou fried rice filled with tender, glistening shrimp. He Yu stood there, frozen in place, for a very long time.

This was the first time Xie Qingcheng had ever made dinner just for him. His heart raced in his chest. Maybe...maybe Xie Qingcheng had been thinking the same as him. Maybe he thought that this would be their last night together, so he didn't want to leave behind any regrets. Maybe he also had something to tell He Yu...

Once again he recalled Xie Qingcheng's words from last night—*No regrets*—and the way Xie Qingcheng had kissed him on his own initiative, with a passion that didn't stem from a need to pretend. It all surged together to raise his expectations, adorning his heart with glimmering dots of light like flowers struggling to bloom before the end of the world. He Yu stared at the spread of home-cooked dishes, his heart pounding like a drum and his palms clammy with sweat, until he felt overwhelmed with the need to walk back to the living room for a cup of hot water. It wasn't until he'd drunk a few sips that he finally managed to compose himself, schooling his features into something that resembled normal.

He settled down at the tea table and listened absentmindedly to the sound of running water for a while, before turning to look back to the kitchen, where the lights were still on and the dishes were set on the dining table. The feeling was like waiting for an important interview. On the one hand, he wanted it to start as quickly as possible so he could know the final result faster; on the other, he wished that time would slow down so he could have a few more minutes to compose himself.

As he sat there, he suddenly spotted a copy of *Ode to the Nightingale* sitting in front of him. Xie Qingcheng must have left it there after reading through part of the volume. He Yu picked it up and began idly flipping through the pages when he suddenly noticed some handwriting scrawled across the title page. Taking a closer look at the scribbled text, he was stunned. Despite the risks, Xie Qingcheng had left him a message.

He Yu shot a quick glance at the bathroom door before carefully rereading the words written on the title page.

He Yu, Duan Wen sent someone to inform me that he wishes to speak with me alone tonight at eight o'clock. There's food on the table. Eat well and wait for me to come back.

It seemed that Xie Qingcheng thought he would be returning late, so he'd left him a message in advance. For safety's sake, he didn't include any other information, but from what was written, He Yu could deduce that Duan Wen must have noticed something strange and intended to sound Xie Qingcheng out. Xie Qingcheng had no choice but to go.

He Yu glanced at his watch. It was already nearly eight o'clock.

His heart thudded heavily. Then, with shaking hands and a complicated tangle of emotions in his chest, he tore out the title page inscribed with his own name and folded it into a white rose, quietly tucking it into his breast pocket. The moment he finished, he heard the bathroom door open, and he jumped to his feet to hurry into the bedroom.

Xie Qingcheng was already changed into his clothes and was in the middle of toweling his hair. He started in surprise when He Yu burst in. "... You're back already?"

It took two swallows before He Yu could respond. "Mm."

They were still under surveillance, and with the distance between them, it wouldn't do to say more. As He Yu hesitated, a stroke of inspiration hit him. He picked up a snow-white towel and draped it over Xie Qingcheng's shoulders, before turning to kiss the hair at his temples with warm, trembling lips.

"Let me help you blow-dry your hair," he said, tugging gently at Xie Qingcheng's sleeve.

After a brief flash of surprise, Xie Qingcheng quickly caught on to his meaning. Lowering his lashes, he followed He Yu into the bathroom with an inscrutable expression on his face.

Plugging the hair dryer into an outlet in front of the mirror, He Yu took his place behind Xie Qingcheng and pressed the full length of his body against Xie Qingcheng's bathrobe-covered back. "Your clothes are all wet."

No response.

“We should make sure to dry your hair thoroughly.”

With that, He Yu turned on the switch and began to help Xie Qingcheng dry his hair. In the din, he said in a barely audible voice, “I saw your note. Did Duan Wen say why he wants to meet you?”

“He said he just wanted to talk, but of course I have to go,” Xie Qingcheng replied. “I can tell he’s trying to sound me out, though, so there’s no need to worry. What about you? How are preparations for tomorrow going?”

“Everything’s been arranged...”

As the blow-dryer roared on, He Yu and Xie Qingcheng quickly went over the day’s important developments and what they’d have to do tomorrow. He Yu told Xie Qingcheng that he’d had to give up the idea of Zheng Jingfeng working with them, and so he’d rescued Chen Man instead. After a beat of surprise, Xie Qingcheng nodded in approval. Indeed, with Zheng Jingfeng out of the running, Chen Man was their best option.

“Does he understand the situation?” Xie Qingcheng asked.

“Yes.”

“...You two got into an argument, didn’t you.”

“Time was of the essence, so we only talked business. There wasn’t anything to argue about.”

That made sense. If Chen Man had told He Yu that he and Xie Qingcheng were never romantically involved, He Yu would definitely have been acting differently. They really must not have talked about anything aside from their plans for tomorrow.

His hair was nearly dry. He Yu gently combed his fingers through the strands, breathing in Xie Qingcheng’s cold scent. As their talk drew to a close, he looked up at their reflection in the mirror. It was nearly eight o’clock. They were running out of time.

“Xie Qingcheng,” whispered He Yu.

Their eyes met across the mirror. “Mm?”

He Yu wrapped his arms around Xie Qingcheng's waist and watched his reflection in the mirror do the same. He could feel him trembling in his embrace. Looking down at the pale slope of Xie Qingcheng's neck, he couldn't help but lean down and press a kiss onto the line of his jaw. Both the kiss and the trembling were genuine, not for show.

"Are you worried about tomorrow too?" he asked softly.

Xie Qingcheng's fingers paled where they rested against the sink. "Don't worry, everything will be fine."

Thick eyelashes shuddering, He Yu trailed a line of kisses from Xie Qingcheng's chin to the bridge of his nose, his eyebrows, his forehead, until finally he turned him around and lifted him onto the vanity. Xie Qingcheng's back pressed up to the cool surface of the mirror. He Yu intertwined their fingers, pinning his hands against the glass as he captured his lips in a fierce kiss.

The room began to feel warmer as he kissed Xie Qingcheng with heart-wrenching tenderness, with unspeakable grief and desperate hope. When their lips parted wetly, He Yu looked up, his face cast in the intimate glow of the vanity lights as he stared mesmerized at Xie Qingcheng's face. With barely any distance between them, he said, "You know, today I... almost couldn't resist..."

"Couldn't resist what?" Xie Qingcheng asked between gasps.

"I almost couldn't resist killing Chen Man."

Xie Qingcheng's eyes widened in shock.

Tender yet terrifying, He Yu nuzzled his cheek. "I was thinking, if I killed him...we could go back to the way we were before... I wanted him to disappear from this world. If I killed him, you would have no idea. You wouldn't know a thing..."

"He Yu, you—"

"But then I thought of you, and I didn't do it."

Silence fell.

He Yu captured one of his hands against the sink. "Xie Qingcheng, I know why you don't want to talk to me about personal matters," he said softly. "We have a lot of preparations to make, and our mission concerns the

lives of thousands of soldiers, and even more victims. But I feel like there's something that you've been wanting to tell me since last night. I don't know if it's what I've been wanting to hear, but even so, I really want to know what it is. That's why I spent the whole day running calculations for the most important matters at hand, mentally preparing myself. I promise that no matter what it is, I won't lose control and it won't affect our mission."

Xie Qingcheng was speechless.

"Xie Qingcheng, have you considered what would happen if something goes wrong and one of us dies tomorrow?"

There was a lurch in Xie Qingcheng's heart.

"I don't want things to end with regrets," He Yu continued, "or to die without ever working up the courage to say the truth that I know in my heart. I'm not okay with that. There are a lot of things I want to tell you, and I know you think doing what's right is important, but if it's possible, for my sake, can you trust that I won't lose control? Take a risk by telling me what you're thinking? Can you give me this night—the last bit of time we have together—and be selfish, just this once, just for me?"

Almond eyes gazed at peach blossoms. He Yu looked as he had when he asked Xie Qingcheng to dance years ago, his expression filled with boundless hope mixed with a hint of apprehension.

"Xie Qingcheng, is there something you want to tell me tonight?"

Those peach-blossom eyes gazed steadily back at him. When they were intimate, it felt like the world would end the next day. When they were suffering, it felt like the torture had yet to begin.

In truth, after He Yu left the suite that morning, Xie Qingcheng had spent a long time thinking too. He knew that given their mental and emotional states, it was too dangerous to discuss their personal affairs right now. But between completing their preparations and the start of the final mission, there would be no other opportunity for them to talk to each other. There were some words that, if left unsaid tonight, would weigh on his heart for the rest of his life...

But he hadn't expected He Yu to consider things so thoroughly that all the necessary preparations for the final battle would be done by the end

of the day, giving them time to spare in the evening. And now the young man was asking him, *Can you give this time to me?*

I've prepared all day. Can you trust that I won't lose control? Can you be selfish, just this once, just for me?

Their eyes caught on each other. Xie Qingcheng never took risks for anyone, but now, before He Yu, he wavered.

“...Yes,” he said at last. Composing himself, he stared at He Yu, unblinking. He had never cared about love before, had always considered it a matter beneath mention. But now, sitting before He Yu, he was changed. “There’s something I want to tell you.”

He Yu’s grip tightened around Xie Qingcheng’s hand. “Me too. I have so many things I want to tell you.”

They could both hear a heartbeat pounding like a drum, but neither knew whose it was.

Xie Qingcheng held his gaze and said, firmly, one word at a time like a promise, “I do as well.”

The rims of He Yu’s eyes reddened. “Then, tonight...”

The desk clock in the living room chimed just as the doorbell rang.

It was eight. Duan Wen was a stickler for punctuality, so there was already someone waiting at the door—though Xie Qingcheng wouldn’t leave immediately. He took in He Yu’s face; it looked like, just as he himself had, He Yu had already guessed what he wanted to say.

Their love was like ice left frozen and untouched through the whole of winter. When it was exposed to the sun, it wouldn’t immediately melt all the way through. Instead, it would thin first, breaking into smaller pieces to allow the water within to flow out. They went from not hating each other to protecting each other, from protecting each other to some ambiguous state. They then changed to restless anxiety, tentatively sounding each other out, and confirming their feelings for each other... Little by little, as spring settled in, the ice would finally melt into a long-awaited flood.

Thankfully, all of this had been revealed not suddenly but gradually, which was for the best... Someone who’d suffered from frostbite for a long time couldn’t be abruptly immersed in hot water. They had to be slowly

wiped down and warmed up a few degrees at a time to recover without injury.

This was exactly how it was for the two of them.

When the heat in their hearts could no longer be concealed, it was as if a covert courtship was finally coming to its end. The two people hidden beneath that shroud already vaguely knew what the other was thinking without either of them saying “I love you.” Deep behind the silk, they gazed at each other like a bride and groom through a layer of thin red fabric. Even if the fan had yet to be raised, even if the veil had yet to be lifted, they could still faintly make out the other’s face.

All that was missing was a solemn declaration of feelings. They were short one night of heartfelt conversation that could undo a thousand tangled knots of emotion.

“Wait for me, okay?” Xie Qingcheng told him. “Once I’m done meeting with Duan Wen, this whole night will be yours.”

As He Yu gazed into Xie Qingcheng’s eyes, an indescribable, searing emotion surged in his heart. As the doorbell kept on ringing urgently, he kissed Xie Qingcheng again. “All right. I’ll wait for you to come back.”

The doorbell rang and rang.

Their lips parted. Xie Qingcheng smoothed down his clothes and was about to leave when he suddenly remembered something. Turning back to He Yu, he said, “Oh, right.”

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s something I want to tell you first.”

He Yu’s heart began to race. “What is it?”

“I’ve never dated Chen Man.” Xie Qingcheng gazed back at He Yu as he quietly stood before the hydrangea-engraved door. He knew that He Yu would understand what he meant. He was certain he would.

Those words struck He Yu in the heart, clear and straightforward. But rather than churning his feelings into a chaotic mess, they were a spiritual sedative, calmly laying the foundation for a myriad of emotions. Once Xie Qingcheng returned, all these words and actions could be expressed, ice finally melting into spring.

He didn't want to leave behind any regrets.

"Never," Xie Qingcheng repeated.

A wave of heat surged through He Yu's chest, his eyes growing hot with tears. For a moment, he felt lightheaded. He was so happy, but perhaps he had endured too many hardships; his heart ached fiercely, overwhelmed at once by intense love and intense pain. "...I...I didn't know..."



“There are many things that you don’t know. Wait for me. I have some things to ask you as well.”

“Okay...”

Standing at the door, Xie Qingcheng glanced back at He Yu one last time. Cast half in shadow, he turned and offered He Yu what seemed to be a smile.

It was a smile He Yu had never seen before. The door to the guest room in his dreams seemed to finally swing open. Xie Qingcheng gazed down at the young boy with a smile and said, “What are you so worried about, Little Devil? I’ve been here all along.”

I’ve been here all along...

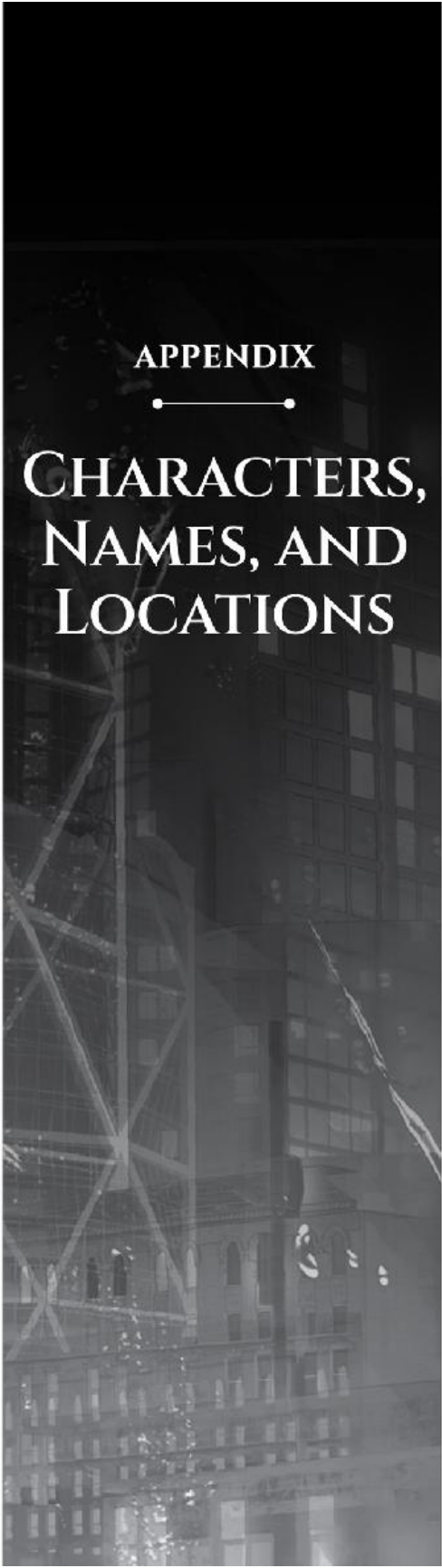
The door closed with a gentle *click*.

Xie Qingcheng left with Duan Wen’s trusted aide. He Yu stood alone in his suite for a long time, his mind a tumultuous mess.

He stood on the boundary between yesterday and today, between his youth and his adulthood, in a room identical to that room from the past, his heart pounding like a drum in his chest.

“Come back soon,” he murmured into the empty space. “I’ll be waiting for you here.”

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
CASE FILE COMPENDIUM
VOLUME 9



APPENDIX

CHARACTERS,
NAMES, AND
LOCATIONS

CHARACTERS

Main Characters

HE YU 贺予: A pharmaceutical company heir in his early twenties with a rare mental illness.

XIE QINGCHENG 谢清呈: He Yu's former doctor, who left teaching at medical school due to his failing health.

Supporting Characters

XIE XUE 谢雪: Xie Qingcheng's younger sister, and a lecturer at He Yu's university.

WEI DONGHENG 卫冬恒: Xie Xue's husband, a Huzhou University student from a wealthy family.

CHEN YAN 陈衍: A police officer and family friend of Xie Qingcheng. Nicknamed "Chen Man."

QIN CIYAN 秦慈岩: Xie Qingcheng's former colleague, who was killed by the angry son of a patient.

LI RUOQIU 李若秋: Xie Qingcheng's ex-wife.

LÜ ZHISHU 吕芝书: He Yu's mother, a wealthy businesswoman.

HE JIWEI 贺继威: He Yu's father, a wealthy businessman who was often away from home. Deceased.

HUANG ZHILONG 黄志龙: A powerful entertainment executive.

ZHENG JINGFENG 郑敬风: A veteran criminal investigator and former colleague of Xie Qingcheng's parents.

DUAN WEN 段闻: A major figure in the sinister Mandela Syndicate.

ANTHONY: A doctor who works with the Mandela Syndicate. Xie Qingcheng's cousin.

ZOYA: A Russian scientist working for the Mandela Syndicate.

DUAN CUIZHEN 段瑾珍: The real head of the Mandela Syndicate, an elderly woman who has had her brain transplanted into the body of a young boy.

Name Guide

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder,” which can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

DI/DIDI: A word meaning “younger brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning “older brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

LAOSHI: A word meaning “teacher” that can be used to refer to any educator, often in deference. Can also be attached to someone’s name as a suffix.

LAOBAN: A word meaning “boss” that can be used to refer to one’s superior or the proprietor of a business. Can also be attached to someone’s name as a suffix.

SAOZI/-SAO: A word meaning “elder brother’s wife.” It can be used to address the wife (or informally, girlfriend) of an unrelated male peer.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

XUEZHANG: Older male classmate.

XUEDI: Younger male classmate.

XUEJIE: Older female classmate.

XUEMEI: Younger female classmate.



APPENDIX

GLOSSARY

GLOSSARY

BAIDU: A Chinese tech company that provides a variety of online services. Its search engine, Baidu Search, and its online encyclopedia, Baidu Baike, are comparable in popularity to Google and Wikipedia in other countries.

EYES: Descriptions like “almond eyes” or “peach-blossom eyes” refer to eye shape. Almond eyes have a balanced shape, like that of an almond, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

FACE: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as “face,” is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, “having face” refers to having a good reputation, and “losing face” refers to having one’s reputation hurt. Meanwhile, “giving face” means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while “not wanting face” implies that a person is acting so poorly or shamelessly that they clearly don’t care about their reputation at all. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

JADE: Jade is a semi-precious mineral with a long history of ornamental and functional usage in China. The word “jade” can refer to two distinct minerals, nephrite and jadeite, which both range in color from white to gray to a wide spectrum of greens.

UNIVERSITIES AND CLASS STRUCTURE: In Chinese universities, students are assigned to a class of students in their major. Each class takes their major courses together for the duration of their university career.

WECHAT: A Chinese instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app ubiquitous in modern Chinese society. People use its text, call, and voice message functions for both personal and business communications. Many vendors in China prefer its mobile payment capabilities to cash.

WEIBO: A popular Chinese microblogging social media platform similar to Twitter.

XUEBA: (学霸) Literally “academic tyrant,” this is a slang term for high-achieving students. Usually complimentary.

FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

Cruel tyrant Taxianjun killed his way to the throne and now reigns as the first-ever emperor of the mortal realm. Yet somehow, he is unsatisfied. Left cold and bereft, abandoned by all he held dear, he takes his own life...only to be reborn anew.

Awakening in the body of his younger self—Mo Ran, a disciple of the cultivation sect Sisheng Peak—he discovers the chance to relive his life. This time, he vows to attain the gratification that once eluded him: all who defied him will fall, and never again will they treat him like a dog. His greatest fury is reserved for Chu Wanning, the coldly beautiful and aloofly cat-like cultivation teacher who betrayed and thwarted Mo Ran time and again in their last life. Yet as Mo Ran shamelessly pursues his own goals in this life he thought lost, he begins to wonder if there might be more to his teacher—and his own feelings—than he ever realized.

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The HUSKY & His WHITE CAT SHIZUN 1



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FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HUSKY AND HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

Noble-born Mo Xi is the foremost general of Chonghua, known for his ruthless temper and ascetic air. Once he was one of two promising young commanders, twin stars of the empire. His comrade, the lowborn Gu Mang, was Mo Xi's brother-in-arms, best friend, and—secretly—his lover, until the day Gu Mang turned traitor and joined the ranks of their nation's greatest enemy.

Now Gu Mang has been returned to the empire a ruined man, a shadow of the military genius he once was. The public clamors for his death, and no one yearns for vengeance more than Mo Xi. Or so he thought—for faced once more with his bitterest enemy, Mo Xi is left with more questions than answers. Why did the man he loved betray him? And what secrets hide behind Gu Mang's tortured eyes?

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JJWXC / Seven Seas Entertainment

Footnotes

Chapter 227: A Facade Half Torn

[1] These are the main characters in the traditional Chinese opera The Hegemon-King Bids His Lady Farewell. At the end of the opera the defeated Hegemon-King of Western Chu commits suicide, followed by his wife Consort Yu.

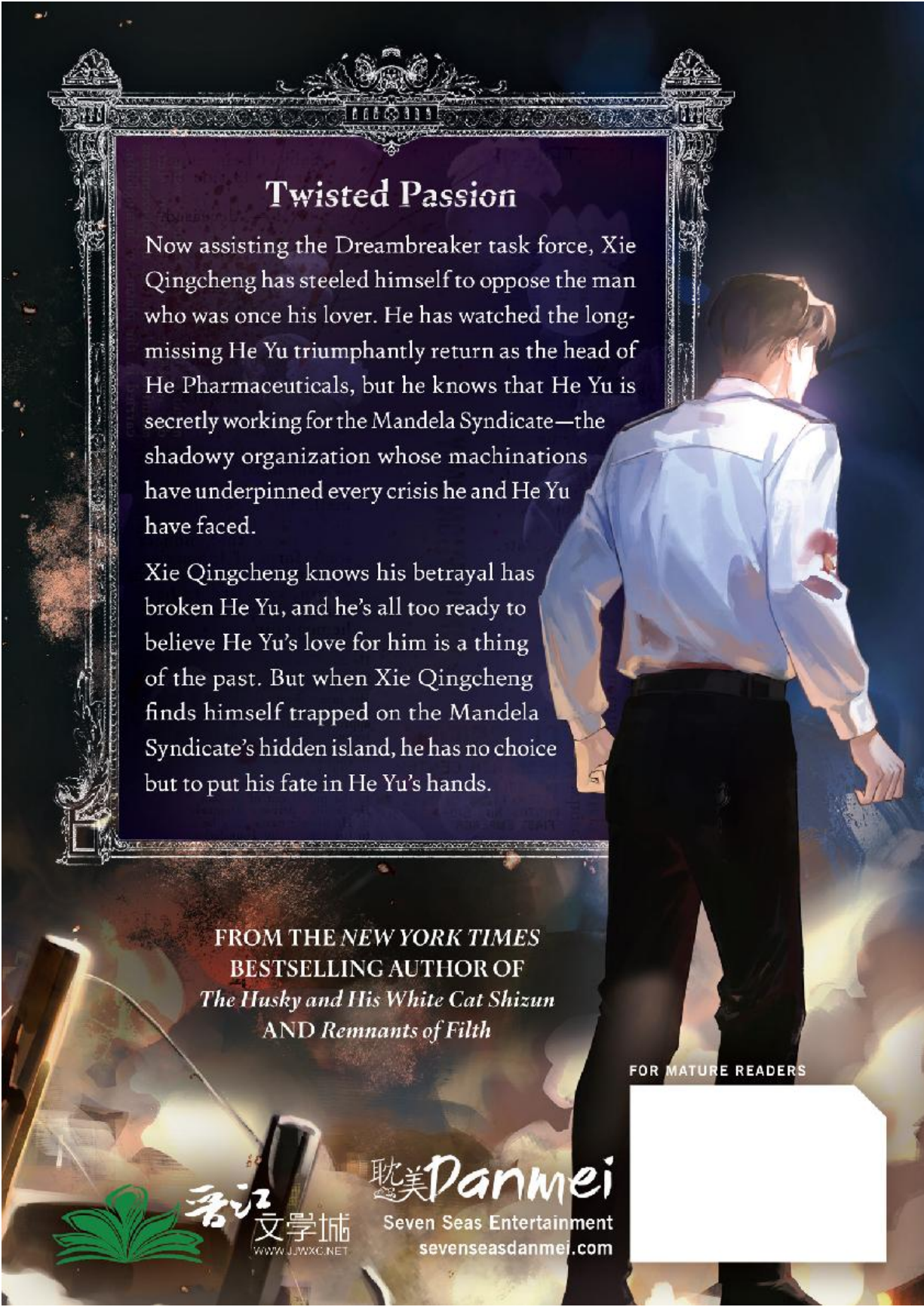


感谢阅读， 回忆长伴。♡

*"Thank you for reading,
may these memories
stay with you forever."*



- Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat



Twisted Passion

Now assisting the Dreambreaker task force, Xie Qingcheng has steeled himself to oppose the man who was once his lover. He has watched the long-missing He Yu triumphantly return as the head of He Pharmaceuticals, but he knows that He Yu is secretly working for the Mandela Syndicate—the shadowy organization whose machinations have underpinned every crisis he and He Yu have faced.

Xie Qingcheng knows his betrayal has broken He Yu, and he's all too ready to believe He Yu's love for him is a thing of the past. But when Xie Qingcheng finds himself trapped on the Mandela Syndicate's hidden island, he has no choice but to put his fate in He Yu's hands.

FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES
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The Husky and His White Cat Shizun
AND *Remnants of Filth*

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